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THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES



Scottsdale won the day for Michelle A. Wiltgen, AVP and National Marketing Manager, National Interstate Insurance Company.

America's Southwest

One Region, Many Settings & Personalities
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The iconic Sydney Opera House on Sydney Harbor.

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Publisher's Message

The Great Outdoors

The heat index is running high these days in sunny South Florida, but, for the most part, we are used to the 90-plus degree temperatures that often feel more like 100-plus. So it is in many parts of our country during the dog days of summer. Nonetheless, as meeting pros search for places and spaces that serve to engage and enlighten their attendees, they often gravitate toward Southern-

most destinations — especially those that boast meeting venues open to the great outdoors.

In our cover story this month, “America’s Southwest: One Region, Many Settings & Personalities” on page 44, we explore the diverse and bountiful options available in Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Michelle A. Wiltgen, assistant vice president and national marketing manager for National Interstate Insurance Company, staged her Spring 2015 Venture and National Accounts meeting in Scottsdale. Wiltgen, who appears on our cover, says, “What we love about Scottsdale other than the climate is that the city is friendly



and accessible. We look for venues that are easy in and out, easy to get around and have plenty of things to do. Scottsdale fits every criteria.”

Wiltgen selected the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Gainey Ranch in part due to their outstanding outdoor spaces. “What stood out to me was first of all how beautiful the property is, but more specifically, the room product was very nice as well as the meeting space (windows are always a plus) and the venues for meals — we prefer outdoor spaces, and the Hyatt has several.”

And in “Small Meeting on the Rise” on page 18, Devon Binder, CMM, CMP, who planned an annual conference for financial services professionals, finds that Colorado’s Keystone Resort area is ideal for memorable activities in the great outdoors. Binder notes, “The patio is such a lovely outdoor space, and the restaurant is a very casual, laidback setting. At Keystone there’s a lake behind the lodge and a little pavilion where we do a cigar and whiskey tasting. We also do yoga on the deck of the mid-station lodge halfway up the mountain, so participants take the gondola up. We’ve done more adventurous activities like zip lining, mountain biking, rock climbing and Segway tours.”

Whether you are seeking the ultimate meeting experience in the great outdoors or in a cozy, intimate meeting venue, you will find your next best meeting ideas from your fellow planners in these pages.

Harvey Grotsky

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MGM Resorts Plans 5,000-Seat Theater at Monte Carlo

LAS VEGAS, NV — MGM Resorts International, one of the world's leading presenters of live entertainment, announced plans for an approximately 5,000-seat theater at Monte Carlo Resort and Casino.

With more than 7 million entertainment tickets sold in 2014 alone, MGM Resorts owns and operates two arenas; two Las Vegas Strip festival lots (62 acres); seven theaters housing Cirque du Soleil production shows; 14 theaters for concerts, headliners and comedy performances; and more than two dozen lounges and nightclubs. Additionally, it is currently developing a new world-class Las Vegas arena as well as integrated resort projects in Macau and National Harbor, Maryland, each of which will feature entertainment venues as central amenities.

Adjacent to The Park and 20,000-seat arena currently under con-



Rendering of the Theater at Monte Carlo Resort and Casino.

struction on Las Vegas Boulevard between Monte Carlo and New York-New York, the theater will anchor the dynamic new entertainment district currently taking shape. While The Park and Arena are expected to open in April 2016, the Monte Carlo

theater is projected to welcome its first act at the end of 2016. Unique to the market, the theater will offer dynamic seating that allows for easy transformation into multiple configurations, reflecting the flexibility of the space. www.mgmresorts.com

Omni Hotels & Resorts Earns Highest Honors in JD Power Study

DALLAS, TX — Omni Hotels & Resorts ranked highest among upper-upscale hotel brands, according to J.D. Power and Associates' 2015 North American Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study released July 15. Eight key factors were examined including overall satisfaction, reservations, check-in/check-out, guest rooms, food & beverage, hotel services, hotel facilities and cost. This year's highest ranking marks Omni's sixth time as the leading hotel brand in this study.

Omni has outperformed the industry average for the past 15 years, and has been the leader in food & beverage indicator for four straight years. The results are based on guest feedback from customers who stayed in an Omni hotel from July 2014 through June 2015.

Highlights from this year's study showed that overall satisfaction in the brand increased 17 points from the prior year. This is the highest Overall Guest Satisfaction score ever for the Upper Upscale category. Omni ranked No. 1 in seven of the eight categories measured.

www.omnihotels.com

Holland America Launches New 'Incentive Choice' Program

SEATTLE, WA — Holland America Line is launching a new program exclusively for incentive groups called "Incentive Choice." Featuring a comprehensive package of valuable amenities and preferential pricing, Incentive Choice makes corporate group travel the ultimate reward for organizations seeking to motivate their teams. In addition to special group pricing with attractive savings in suites, verandas and staterooms, Incentive Choice offers a selection of amenities such as a beverage package that includes unlimited fountain drinks, Explorations Café nonalcoholic coffees and a complimentary bottle of house wine with dinner each night.

In addition, incentive groups can choose two of the following options: bon voyage sparkling wine, bon voyage canapés, bon voyage chocolate-dipped strawberries or a complimentary photo. Also included in the package is a choice of one of the following options: one dinner in the Pinnacle Grill per guest, a 100-minute Internet package or a one-hour group cocktail party with hot hors d'oeuvres. www.hollandamerica.com/corporateIncentives/Main.action



Months after the 2015 FICP Winter Symposium in Boston was disrupted by a snowstorm of "historic proportions," the 2015 FICP Education Forum went off without a hitch June 24-26 and drew more than 220 planners and hospitality partners to the JW Marriott Washington, DC. Attendees gained valuable knowledge through education sessions and connected at three unique evening events, which featured spectacular views and a taste of local DC.



Education sessions encompassed an array of topics from new event technology and social media to crisis management and compliance. Attendees also heard from several keynote speakers. Daniel Pink invited attendees to consider the power of "small wins," and the impact they can play in organizational success, while Dr. Kim Bercovitz spoke to the importance of health and wellness and how this can be tied into events. The event's Speaker Showcase featured three compelling presentations from Ron Tite, Carol Roth and Max Valiquette, with Tite and Roth playing key roles as emcees as well. Wrapping up the event, crisis management expert Judy Smith, walked attendees through how to handle critical situations using captivating real-life examples and personal anecdotes. A special presentation from high school student and Junior Achievement (JA) volunteer Anya received huge accolades from the audience as she shared her inspiring outlook on how JA is making an impact with local children. Registration is now live for the 2015 FICP Annual Conference, which takes place November 15-18 at Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas. The 2016 FICP Education Forum is set for June 22-24 at The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay in Half Moon Bay, California. Learn more at www.ficpnet.com.

Event Promotions

By Scott Steinberg



Create a Must-See Social Media Strategy to Support Objectives

Contemplating giving your event's social media plan a strategic upgrade? According to research by website development firm Creativo, you are not alone. Roughly 62 percent of promoters say that social media has become more important to outreach efforts in recent months, while nearly three-quarters saw boosts in website traffic after investing just six hours on social networks weekly. But ironically, as Awareness Inc.'s recent State of Social Marketing report revealed, many corporate meeting planners still struggle to consistently define how to measure the impact of these efforts. Luckily for those hoping to connect more effectively with attendees, there's a better way.

As industry watchdogs such as Jay Baer explain, creating a powerful social media strategy starts with plotting larger tactical objectives. The goal for meeting planners is not to be good at the business of social media, he says. The goal is to be good at their business because of social media. In other words, as cutting-edge and creative as you choose to make them, social network-based promotions are merely one tent-pole of a broader event promotions strategy.

Social Media as a Megaphone

To be successful with social initiatives, you should first consider how they can support larger and more quantifiable business objectives, i.e. boosting ticket sales, increasing program registrations, or driving conversation amongst key influencers about special occasions. Think of social media as a megaphone: Allowing you to quickly connect and communicate with thousands of audience members worldwide, it can serve as a powerful amplifier for any message. But to make any impact whatsoever on your event's bottom line, you must first consider whom you're speaking with, where they're found online, what motivates them, and both how to engage these individuals and prompt specific actions, e.g. increasing newsletter sign-up rates or onsite attendance. In short, extensive upfront planning must go into crafting your voice and vision, aligning each with key objectives and audience expectation, and finding ways of making sure that all communications efforts stand out and have something meaningful to say when heard.

Many meeting planners myopically focus on driving widespread interest and uptake, and obsess over metrics such as likes, tweets and shares — the most immediately visible signs they've been able to cause any reaction. But suc-

cessful social campaigns focus on macro-, not micro-level goals, and are typically formulated in reverse.

Plotting a new corporate event? Begin by defining specific business objectives for it, then crafting marketing plans and tactical strategies for executing them, of which social media solutions will only be one part. To ultimately win with social media, rather than chasing intangible gains, start by defining meaningful and measurable goals — e.g. getting more people signed up for educational programs or to participate in key networking functions — then work backwards to build the framework and infrastructure that support them.

How to Tailor Your Social Campaigns

Here are a few simple ways you might tailor your social campaigns to support these larger objectives:

- **Solving your audience's problems.** Ask yourself: What's in it for them? Hints, tips, how-to-articles, post-mortems, case studies and other material that helps save others time, money, effort and energy provides audiences with immediate value.
- **Demonstrating thought leadership.** You can cement your event's must-see status and expand its audience reach by transforming your social media channels into a go-to source for advice and insight into the latest industry happenings, innovations and trends.
- **Celebrating your community.** Invite prospective attendees to suggest new ideas for your events, share items of interest, or forward along user-generated content such as videos, photos, etc. that can be incorporated throughout your presentations and programs.

The Good News

From both financial and promotional standpoints, recent data shows that it's eminently possible for meeting planners to move the needle by making these kinds of efforts. Moreover, studies show that social media has a 100 percent higher lead-to-close rate than traditional marketing methods such as print or online advertisements. But just as likes or shares alone may not tell the entire story, numbers alone can be deceiving. Understanding not only how many individuals you interact with and how often, but also whom you're connecting with, when, where, how and why is also crucial for event planners.

The World's Biggest Cocktail Party

In many ways, social media is actually the world's biggest cocktail party. Success with supporting platforms is all about understanding situational dynamics, positively driving and maintaining the flow of conversation, and considering which voices echo farthest — as well as how to drive ongoing dialogue. When plotting campaigns for your corporate events, start by looking and listening. Consider who's conversing about your chosen subject online, the conversation being engaged in and the overall context, then think about how to add value to these exchanges. Understand who your key influencers are; what motivates them; how, when and why they engage with your brand; and the ways to best connect with them.

Afterwards, consider the results you're looking to achieve, how to best tell your story and the metrics you can use to measure a campaign's impact. And don't forget to carefully weave these promotional efforts into your larger marketing activities, and neatly tie them all together: Messaging should be consistent across all platforms and should cross-promote each concurrently-running initiative. Remember that social media is just one part of a holistic promotions strategy.

Create Value for Your Audience

Once live, constantly monitor public sentiment and campaign performance, and regularly iterate and refine efforts

based on analytics and audience feedback. One thing you should always ask yourself when doing so: How can others benefit from engaging with you? Ultimately, as a corporate meeting planner, to drive positive exchanges, you should always strive to create value for your audience. Whether in the form of limited-time promotions or new announcements, consistently look for ways to inform, entertain and create value for attendees. With so many voices now competing for attention online, it's essential to incentivize audiences to pass the word along.

However you choose to utilize online platforms, one thing is certain. When it comes to social media, there's no magic formula for success, or single strategy for making special occasions or surrounding brands go viral. But by planning ahead, keeping your eyes and ears open, regularly reassessing performance and refining as you go, any business can create powerful campaigns around their corporate events whose lasting effects echo far beyond ephemeral shares or retweets.

I&FMM

Scott Steinberg is an award-winning professional speaker. A bestselling expert on leadership and innovation, and the author of Make Change Work for You: 10 Ways to Future-Proof Yourself, Fearlessly Innovate, and Succeed Despite Uncertainty. Steinberg is among today's leading providers of keynote speeches, workshops and seminars for Fortune 500 firms. www.AKeynoteSpeaker.com





Gaming Resorts

The Best of Everything for Meetings and Events

By Derek Reveron

Planners benefit from the great value, numerous dining and entertainment options, and higher attendance that come with meeting at gaming resorts. Planners stand to benefit even more in the future due to growing competition among gaming resorts.

New properties are opening as existing resorts renovate and expand. Gaming destinations, notably Las Vegas and Atlantic City, are diversifying by spending billions to add more non-gaming attractions. Meanwhile, major gaming destinations continue to set records for meetings and bookings.

Las Vegas leads the way. The city is the No. 1 trade show destination for the 21st consecutive year, according to the *Trade Show News Network's* "2014 TSNN Top 250 Trade Shows in the United States." Sixty of the largest shows met in Las Vegas last year, up from 53 the previous year.

Michelle DeClerck, CMP, president of West Des Moines, Iowa-based Conference Event Management, is a fan of meeting in Las Vegas for a number of reasons. "The sheer number of hotel properties and sleeping rooms, quality restaurants and the ease of air and ground transportation make Vegas one of our top go-to destinations when we source hotel needs," says DeClerck, who recently planned a meeting for an insurance company at the M Resort Spa Casino. "Great dine-around options almost

always exist within just a few hotels' distance from the host headquarters, allowing attendees to plan their own meals and eliminate transfer budgets. Restaurants also accommodate larger parties with frequency," she adds.

Value and Entertainment

The value that Las Vegas offers also is a prime consideration for planners. "When insurance and financial companies look for a competitive edge for their budgets, gaming destinations are often considered because they offer a few more advantages that help businesses stay within budget," explains DeClerck, who has planned meetings at several Las Vegas properties.

Las Vegas' value extends to off-property entertainment. "Many attendees pay for their own entertainment outside of the meetings at gaming facilities, so planners are able to reduce activity budgets as attendees head to casinos or fine restaurants in the vicinity at their own expense," she says. "Another cost advantage comes from the aspect that many guests stay out late in the casinos, thus allowing the planner to reduce the breakfast count as those attendees often sleep in until the meeting starts."

DeClerck recently arranged a meeting for an insurance company at the 390-room M Resort, which boasts 90,000 sf of meeting space, a 23,000-sf



The main pool deck at M Resort, Spa and Casino at dusk.



Credit: Mohegan Sun

A rendering of the 400-room Earth Tower at Mohegan Sun in Connecticut, which will open in 2016.

spa and the Studio B Buffet — twice named the best buffet in Las Vegas by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. The meeting was comprised of more than 100 of the firm's insurance marketing officers, executives and agencies. "While this was one of the smaller meetings that we put on in Vegas, the M Resort treated attendees as if they were the most important group they had all year," says DeClerck. "We always get kudos from attendees on the way they are treated. The M Resort always works hard to stay within the client's budget."

Such top service stems partly from familiarity: The group has met at the M Resort several times. "Due to the frequency with which we take our financial groups to Las Vegas, our director of sourcing has developed such a strong relationship with the M Resort sales team that it makes it easy to go to them when we have a budgeting challenge," says DeClerck. "They work so hard to find a way to help us stay within budget that it's often a preferred hotel choice."

Some of the planner's groups thought they would meet at the M Resort for one year and then return to a property on The Strip for the next meeting. "Instead, they have kept their event here annually as they find it very advantageous to still be at a gaming facility, yet away from all of The Strip's ongoing

action," DeClerck says.

Native American Casinos

While Las Vegas and Atlantic City appeal to planners nationwide, a growing number of Native American tribes operate gaming resorts that appeal to regional groups located within driving distance or a short flight.

Connecticut is home to two popular Native American-owned gaming properties.

The 1,200-room Mohegan Sun will add a second property when the 400-room Earth Hotel opens

in fall 2016. The expansion comes as Massachusetts plans to develop three casinos, including one about an hour's drive away in Springfield.

The Mohegan Sun features 100,000 sf of meeting space, a 10,000-sf arena and a 17,500-sf outdoor terrace.

Foxwoods Resort Casino, which includes Fox Tower, the AAA Four

Diamond Grand Pequot Tower, Great Cedar Hotel, Two Trees Inn and Fix Tower and the 23-suite The Villas, was named a Connecticut Green Lodging Facility and an AAA eco-friendly property. Foxwoods offers 150,000 sf of meeting space and several restaurants including the AAA Four Diamond Paragon.

The Southwestern U.S. offers its share of top Native American gaming properties. In Mescalero, New Mexico, the 273-room Inn of the Mountain Gods Resort & Casino has 40,000 sf of meeting and banquet space, a championship 18-hole golf course and Wendell's Steak & Seafood Restaurant.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, the 497-



Credit: MGM Grand

MGM Grand at Foxwoods in Connecticut.

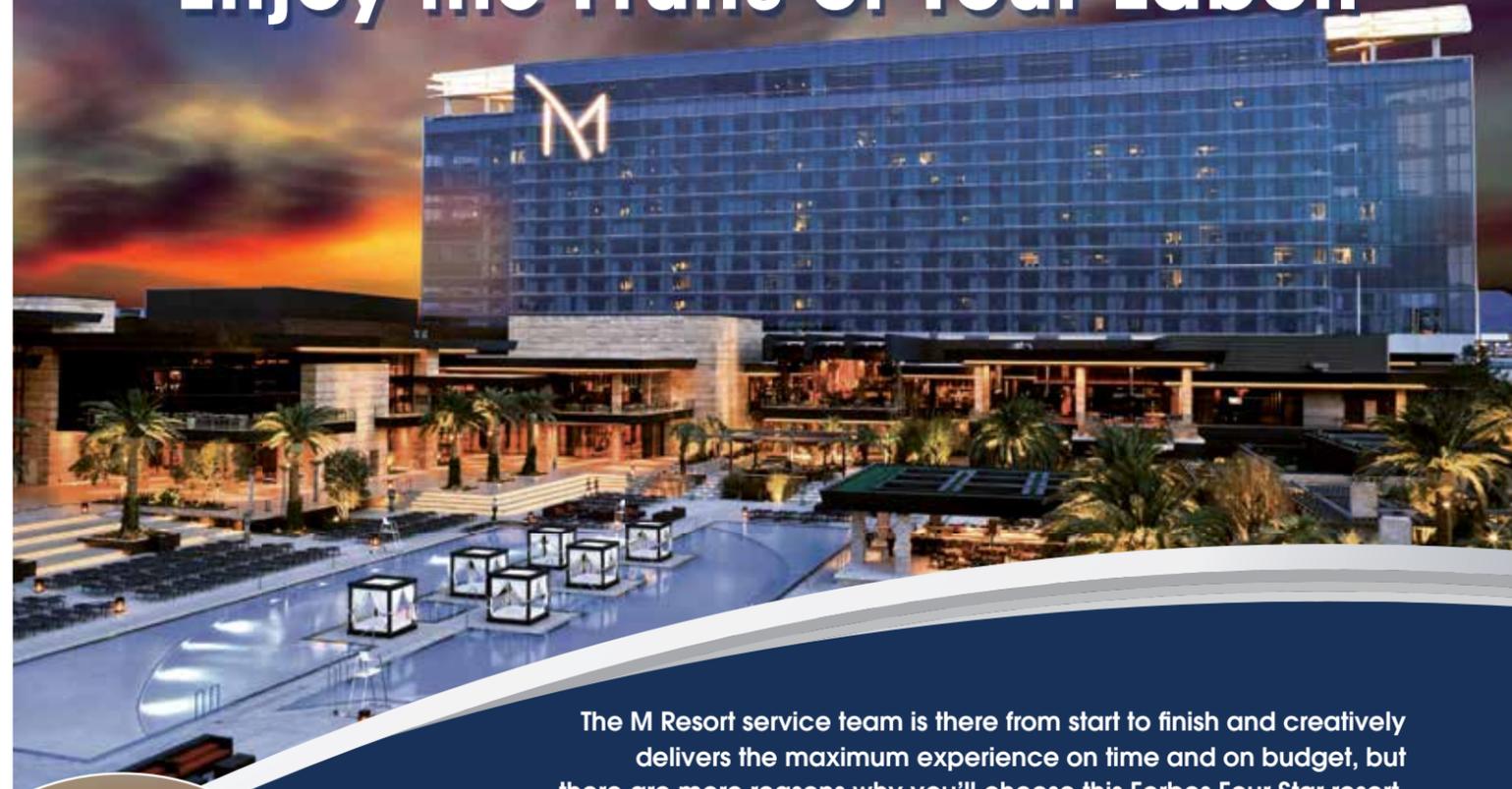
room AAA Four Diamond Talking Stick Resort features 50,000 sf of indoor meeting space, including 22 meeting rooms and the 25,000-sf Salt River Grand Ballroom. Casino Arizona, located not far from Talking Stick, features Cholla Prime Steakhouse & Lounge, which recently received TripAdvisor's "Certificate of



Credit: Inn of the Mountain Gods

The 273-room Inn of the Mountain Gods Resort & Casino in Mescalero, New Mexico.

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Credit: Tulalip Resort Casino

A suite at the Tulalip Resort Casino, an enterprise of the Tulalip Tribe, in Marysville, Washington.

Excellence” Award for the second consecutive year.

In the South, the ever-popular 481-room Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in South Florida offers 17 restaurants, 20,000 sf of meeting space, a 22,000-sf European Spa and nightclubs.

In Biloxi, Mississippi, the 1,740-room MGM-operated AAA Four Diamond Beau Rivage draws groups from throughout the region. The property offers 50,000 sf of meeting space and five restaurants.

Repeat Customer

In the Western U.S., in Marysville, Washington, the 370-room Tulalip Resort Casino is one of the nation’s most popular Native American gaming resorts for meetings. Last September, a group of 140 banking executives and managers from offices in Washington and Alaska held a three-day meeting at Tulalip.

It was the second consecutive year that the group met at Tulalip. “The value is so good that we plan on signing another contract to meet in 2017,” says the banking executive who plans the meetings. “Tulalip always hits it out of the ballpark,” he says. “I’ve been to other casino resorts and every one goes out of its way with services, but Tulalip has the ability to do it better than some others. And our people just love the rooms. They always comment about the great showers.”

The executive raves about Tulalip’s facilities and food. “They have great meeting rooms (30,000 sf of meeting

space) and a great food department with many restaurants,” he says. “The food is very high quality, reasonably priced and when we need to change the number of people showing up for a meal they don’t make you feel like you are putting them out of their way.”

In addition, Tulalip and the surrounding area offer plenty of activities and entertainment. “On the first day, we started off with a golf tournament at a nearby course,” he says. “We also did a wine tasting at the hotel and held a banquet. We also saw a comedian entertaining (at the 3,000-seat Tulalip Amphitheatre). The next day we had an auction and another banquet.”

Atlantic City

Atlantic City is adding more non-gaming attractions to compete with growing gaming markets in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Delaware that are vying for the Northeastern-based groups, long the mainstay of New Jersey gaming properties.

According to Casino Reinvestment Development Authority executive director John Palmieri, “Several large scale, new attractions should stir significant interest in Atlantic City from new and returning visitors throughout 2015. “Bass Pro Shops, The Playground renovation of the Pier Shops, Tropicana’s retail and Boardwalk entertainment areas, and Borgata’s outdoor concert facility are just a few of the exciting additions visitors will be able to enjoy this year,” he said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Atlantic City resorts are prospering.

The number of convention and hotel bookings has been rising at a double-digit rate this year, according to Meet AC, the non-profit agency that touts Atlantic City as a convention and trade show destination. In addition, hotel occupancy increased about three percent to 72.8 percent while the average room rate also climbed.

Numbers may continue to rise due to new non-gaming attractions, notably The Playground, a 464,000-sf self-contained live entertainment, high-end retail and restaurant venue. The Playground will feature a 50,000-person oceanfront concert facility, bowling alley, swimming pool and the Varsity Club, a sports bar. The Playground will be fully open by the end of this year.

New non-gaming attractions include Borgata Festival Park, an outdoor concert venue and festival



Credit: Meet AC

Beachgoers enjoy the sand and surf in Atlantic City, New Jersey, during Thunder Over the Boardwalk—the Atlantic City Airshow.



“They have kept their event (at M Resort) annually as they find it very advantageous to still be at a gaming facility, yet away from all of The Strip’s ongoing action.”

Michelle DeClerck, CMP, President
Conference Event Management, West Des Moines, IA

grounds located at the northeast entrance to Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa. The venue features Borgata-style musical entertainment acts; some of the world’s most popular deejays; and a series of electric dance music parties.

In addition, Harrah’s Resort Waterfront Conference Center is scheduled to open in August. The center-hotel complex is adjacent to Harrah’s Atlantic City and features two 50,000-sf ballrooms, each divisible into 27 smaller meeting rooms.

Off the Beaten Path

In addition to well-known casino resorts in the West, South and East, properties in the Midwest also are growing in popularity and attracting their share of repeat meetings.

For example, Island Resort & Casino in the Upper Peninsula town of Harris, Michigan, has hosted four meetings of about 20 attendees for Anderson Tackman and Co., an Escanaba, Michigan-based tax and accounting firm. “We would probably meet at Island Resort every time if we could get rooms there because it’s our first choice,” says Ray LaMarche, CPA, who also plans the meetings.

LaMarche says there are other gaming properties in Michigan and Wisconsin within a few hours’ drive but they don’t offer the venues that his group needs. “In our area, Island Resort is the premiere conference space and it’s sometimes hard to get a spot unless you book far in advance,” he says. “We set our dates annually and, at that time, see if they have availability. We wanted to meet there this year but we couldn’t get a spot.”

LaMarche cites several advantages of meeting at Island Resort. “It’s centrally located among our five offices in Wisconsin and Michigan, so mostly everybody is within driving distance and that’s important,” says LaMarche. “There are several things to do. People do some gaming, a lot of eating and golfing at the casino’s championship course right off the back doors of the casino.”

Island Resort’s self-contained activities are another plus. “Everything is right there onsite,” says LaMarche. “You don’t have to go anywhere. The meeting rooms are good. There is good wireless connectivity. What it really comes down to is that everybody enjoys coming to that location.”

LaMarche also finds good value at Island Resort. “In terms of value, you probably can’t find a better deal,” he says. “They usually throw in the

conference room at no cost. Food and drinks are reasonable. I just tell them to block off rooms and tell them what we want for meals, and they just bill it to me when we are done. It’s very convenient.”

New & Noteworthy Las Vegas

Las Vegas is investing \$2.3 billion in building the new **Las Vegas Global Business District (LVGDB)**, the largest economic development project the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors



Credit: MGM Resorts International

The stately Nassau Boardroom at The Mirage, Las Vegas.

Authority has initiated since constructing the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC) in the late 1950s.

The project’s first phase includes 750,000 sf of new exhibit space and 187,500 sf of meeting space. The second phase consists of 100,000 sf of



Credit: The Mob Museum

Attendees at the Mob Museum strike a familiar pose as they gear up for a riveting group treasure hunt at the popular museum.



Encore's European-style pool.

additional meeting space and another 100,000-sf general session space. Both phases will increase the entire LVCC to 5.7 million sf from 3.2 million sf. The LVGDB also will include a World Trade Center and global business center designed to attract companies to do business with corporations that meet at the LVCC.

Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino is redesigning more than 3,000 guest rooms and suites as part of the last phase of its resort-wide transformation. In addition, the **Mandalay Bay Convention Center** is adding 350,000 sf of exhibit space and additional ballroom space, bringing the total exhibit and meeting space to more than 2 million sf. The entire project is scheduled for completion by January 2016.

The Mob Museum, the National Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement, announced new special offerings for groups. The museum's Speakers Bureau features members of the museum's board of directors who include professionals from local and state government, law enforcement, the judicial system, media and the business community. For groups seeking teambuilding activities or simply to be active and entertained as part of the company gathering, Museum Scavenger Hunts provide a unique solution. The Mob Museum offers flexible space and can accommodate groups of from 10 to 400 people.

The 1,467-room **Tropicana Las Vegas** now offers more than 100,000 sf of in-

door meeting space due to a 30,000-sf expansion of the Trinidad Pavilion and Meeting Rooms. The expanded convention space features one of the fastest Internet services within a Las Vegas property.

Wynn Las Vegas' Encore Tower Suites and Encore Resort Tower are currently undergoing renovations that include new furnishings, carpeting, technology and additional USB plugs and electrical outlets. The Wynn Las Vegas and its sister property Encore combined provide 4,734 guest rooms and 260,000 sf of meeting space.

Aria recently opened its Sky Pool, a posh pool for guests of the resort's Print Sky Suites. Sky Pool's many amenities and personal services include a private guest entrance, complimentary refreshments, 135 single and 15 double chaise lounge chairs, five daybeds and eight cabanas with flat-screen TVs and curtains.

South Point Hotel and Casino offers South Point Bowling Plaza, a new \$35 million 90,000-sf million bowling tournament facility with 60 lanes, a 360-seat viewing area and 720 locker-room units.

MGM Resorts International operates several internationally known gaming properties in Las Vegas, including **MGM Grand, Bellagio and Mandalay Bay**. MGM's other resorts each have unique identities and offer something different, including varying room rates.



A rendering of Harrah's new Atlantic City Waterfront Conference Center, opening this summer.

Atlantic City

Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa is refreshing its 39 Opus suites and two 5,000-sf Residence suites. The improvements follow the redesign of the resort's 1,566 Classic guest rooms and hotel corridors. Borgata has invested in renovations to its Borgata Buffet; the Fitness Center and men's and women's lounges at Spa Toccare; and the casino floor. Borgata offers 70,000 sf of event space.

Harrah's new Atlantic City Waterfront Conference Center is scheduled to open in August. The center-hotel complex will be accessible to Harrah's Atlantic City and features two 50,000-sf ballrooms divisible into a total of 27 sections.

Tropicana Atlantic City recently completed a \$50 million renovation including renovations to the North Tower's guest rooms and casino floor; new retail shops; a light and sound show for the Boardwalk facade; and a new fitness center on Brighton Avenue.

Resorts Casino Hotel now offers an all-inclusive group meeting package that includes upgraded guest rooms, audio-visual, Wi-Fi in meeting and guest rooms, resort fees and three daily meals. The 943-room property underwent a \$70 million renovation and expansion, including 12,000 sf of additional event space. Meeting space now totals 64,000 sf. In addition, Resorts Casino Hotel is home to a new Margaritaville restaurant.

Planners will have more gaming resort options as some states build new properties and existing ones expand and renovate. As competition increases, gaming resort meccas such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City will continue to lead the way in offering a variety of properties, value, entertainment and meeting spaces in a single destination. **I&FMM**

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Small Meetings on the Rise

By Patrick Simms



How Planners Compete for Space, Dates & Rates in a Seller's Market

Small meetings — those requiring approximately 10–100 guest rooms on peak night — are the bread and butter for many in-house planners in the insurance and financial industries. From a job security perspective, it's good for planners that upper management understands the value of meetings, yet a strong appreciation can lead to a proliferation of small meetings with various objectives, thus increasing a planner's workload.

Small Meetings on the Rise

Lisa Ramsay, CMP, assistant vice president, event and meeting management with Birmingham, Alabama-based Protective Life Insurance Company, notes that small meetings comprise 80–90 percent of the events

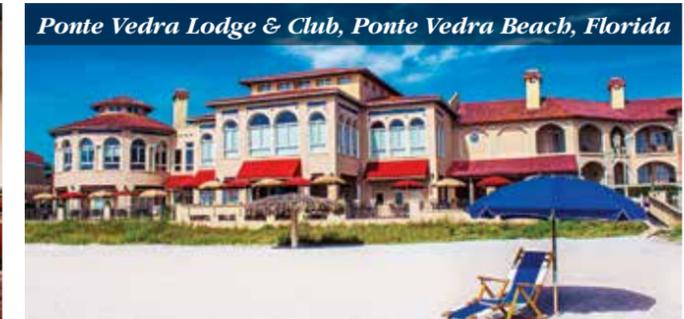
she plans, and include “everything from sales meetings and product launches to board of directors meetings and senior management meetings.” And since the company's senior leaders have wanted to increase their outreach to all levels of employees, small meetings have been on the rise. “They want to drill down and meet with employees that wouldn't necessarily have a lot of contact with senior management,” says Ramsay, “and so have started scheduling small, impromptu meetings, maybe including a lunch, just to discuss ‘what's keeping you up at night, what's working, what do we need to change, what are you hearing from other employees?’”

A greater appreciation for the value of client-facing meetings also can fill

the small-meetings pipeline. Melanie S. Kelman, vice president, event marketing at Atlanta, Georgia-based SunTrust Bank, notes that about 75 percent of the meetings she plans require under 100 guest rooms per night including networking events for private equity firm clients and commercial banking clients. “We have added (planners) to our team because we have grown in that our internal clients understand the value of having meetings and events as a part of their sales process and (establishing) touch points with the clients,” she explains.

Without the addition of new planning staff, a surge in small meetings certainly can create added stress, especially if they come along with short

Continued on page 35



The hotels pictured above are members of Associated Luxury Hotels International's U-200 Gems collection (200 guest rooms or fewer) specializing in serving meeting and incentive programs while ensuring privacy and security.

Continued from page 18

lead times. Such meetings are sometimes called for in the wake of new developments in the company or industry, and internal clients may not want to wait several months to gather the stakeholders.

Short Lead Times

Kim Sky, manager, strategic corporate meetings and events at Chicago, Illinois-based CNA Financial Corporation, notes that a 30- to 60-day lead time is common at her firm. New meetings are scheduled because “the market fluctuates and we have to respond, or maybe some new piece of technology or service comes out and they have to get the word out from their business unit,” she says. “So it's critical

that we stay on top of things and turn (the meetings) around quickly.”

In some cases a planner may be able to obtain longer lead times by clarifying their value to internal clients. “I would honestly say that I have taught our internal clients to understand that in this day and age, we have to plan far in advance since it's harder to find the space,” says Kelman. “So they understand that we need some lead time — at least six months — or we won't necessarily find what we want.”

“I think (placing meetings) is a little more challenging because the market's come back and the hotels are demanding higher rates,” Sky observes. “And the attendee numbers for conventions are back up again, so in ma-

yor markets like Chicago during peak times, it's very difficult to get rooms or meeting space.” And even for small meetings, Sky wishes to spare attendees the connecting flights that are sometimes involved in travel to lower tier cities: “If you have people coming from all over the country, you don't want them spending a day in airports.”

Partner Hotels

The challenge of placing small meetings is typically met through reliable relationships with suppliers, particularly national hotel reps. They're the first stop for many planners, often with the idea of increasing volume of business with a preferred hotel brand. “The more you send to one of the chains the more

Town & Country Small Meetings

Small meetings have a reputation for being cut-and-dried affairs with straightforward training or strategizing objectives. As such, they simply may be booked at a convenient, if nondescript, hotel with little concern for how memorable the experience is, apart from the retention of the meeting content. Yet every meeting, no matter the size, is an opportunity for creating engagement with the host company, and when possible, small meetings should create a distinctive experience for attendees that increases enthusiasm.

Big City Boutique

First-tier cities such as New York are not only highly accessible, but replete with charming boutique hotels that welcome small groups. Just one example is the Kitano New York, the city's only Japanese-owned hotel. Located near Grand Central in the Murray Hill District, the 149-room hotel accommodates up to 70 meeting attendees with six state-of-the-art function rooms; Executive Suites for breakout sessions; and a 1,400-sf Penthouse on the 18th floor. Housed in a 19th century building that was owned by the Rockefellers, the property today blends traditional Eastern and modern Western themes. The Eastern influence is well represented by the hotel's Michelin-rated Hakubai restaurant, and the traditional Japanese Tatami Suite with tatami mats and shoji screens is also available. In fact, stylized Japanese bento boxes with rare delicacies are best served to small groups due to the attention to detail needed to create them, according to hotel representatives.

Open Spaces Out West

In scenic rural areas, planners often can find numerous outdoor

activities that work best for small groups. At Matrix Financial Solutions' Get Connected, an annual conference for financial services professionals, small networking groups routinely break out to take advantage of Colorado's Keystone Resort area, including the view from Keystone's Ski Tip Lodge, where the group has held wine tastings for 15–30 attendees.

"Ski Tip is very much like a B&B," notes Devon Binder, CMM, CMP, who planned Matrix's event when she was senior meeting architect with the meetings management firm Kinsley. "The patio is such a lovely outdoor space, and the restaurant is a very casual, laidback setting." Each afternoon of the program includes about 15 small-group activities in the resort's environs. "At Keystone there's a lake behind the lodge and a little pavilion where we do a cigar and whiskey tasting," notes Binder. "We also do yoga on the deck of the mid-station lodge half-way up the mountain, so participants take the gondola up. We've done a cooking class in the past, and more adventurous activities like zip lining, mountain biking, rock climbing and Segway tours." The latter, she notes, are especially suitable for the "younger people that are getting into the financial field who may be in their 30s," compared to the average age range of Get Connected attendees, 45–55.

"Also popular here in Colorado is a sitting and painting class, so we would take them out and let the instructor show them how to paint the mountainscape. Those are more conducive to closer conversations among the group," she adds.

All of these events are in fact limited to small groups; the cap is about 25 for tastings and cooking classes, for example. Thus, it behooves planners of small programs — whether breakouts from a larger event or freestanding meetings — to consider the teambuilding and networking value of ancillary activities. The group may just be the ideal size for such an event. — PS



Kitano New York's private banquet terrace.



The patio at Keystone Resort's cozy Ski Tip Lodge.

buying power you have," Ramsay says. "So unless the customer that I am planning for says, 'I want a conference center,' for example, then I will go to one of my partner hoteliers, one of the three to four that we reach out to." A good sales rep will not only quickly locate "holes" in hotels' booking schedules that could accommodate the group, but also seek to reflect the group's demographic in the property choice. Says Sky, "Maybe it's a younger, hip group and they don't care that it be a Ritz-Carlton, they're not interested in that. They don't need the chef that won the James Beard Award. They're more interested in having all the technology they need and being able to hang out at some cool places outside the hotel after the meeting."

Adapting to a Seller's Market

The current seller's market can be especially hard on smaller groups, which don't represent as much revenue to hotels. The situation calls for planners to be as flexible and accommodating to hoteliers as possible, in terms of meeting dates, meeting space and line items such as F&B. For example, a smaller group in some cases may be able to use informal

meeting spaces on-property at certain times, freeing up formal space for other group clients. Using informal spaces, such as outdoor patios or dining areas, also can be attractive to the group. "Attendees feel more relaxed and I think that can segue into being more creative, as it doesn't feel like such a staunch type of meeting," says Ramsay, who often looks for hotels to be resourceful in providing spaces for her small groups.

Guest rooms and suites can serve this function in some cases. "In the financial services industry, we often hold one-on-one meetings using the guest rooms as meeting rooms," says Kelman, "and so we have to find a property that is able to remove the furniture as well as understand how those meetings are run, because they are run on the guest room floors. There are hotels that specialize in those meetings, typically in your bigger markets like in Boston, New York and San Francisco." Another option is simply to use the hotel for sleeping rooms and take offsite meeting space; Kelman currently is working on such a program, utilizing the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville.

"We like to use a hotel where it's easy for our clients to find us. At a bigger hotel, it's just more of an inconvenience for the client."



Melanie S. Kelman
V.P., Event Marketing
SunTrust Bank
Atlanta, GA

"If you've got a planner that's not as seasoned as others on your team, driving some of the smaller programs toward that person helps acclimate them."



Lisa Ramsay, CMP
A.V.P., Event & Meeting Management
Protective Life Insurance Co.
Birmingham, AL



The Ocean Reef Club on 2,500 acres in Key Largo, Florida, is an ideal private retreat for incentive programs.

Credit: Ocean Reef Club

Trial Runs

Smaller programs have their own objectives of course, yet they also can effectively serve as “trial runs” for larger meetings that could be brought to the hotel. “You can see how your service and response is from the staff, and if they make you feel like you’re the biggest client in house at the time,” Ramsay says. That experience bodes well for future partnerships with the property.

Kelman, for example, notes that SunTrust has moved on to staging two larger programs at a hotel in New York after it successfully hosted a smaller event for the company. During negotiations for the smaller meeting, there may be occasion to mention the prospect of larger business, with the goal of obtaining leverage. “We explain that we are going to continue to come back (to the city), and we also might look at their hotel for other programs,” Kelman says.

Even more effective, of course, is to actually contract for several programs (even if they are all small) with the same hotelier and thereby fix rates. “We’re starting to look at how we can work on multiyear contracts,” says Kelman, “because prices go up every year. So I’m ‘teaching’ my internal clients that once we’ve been at a property at least twice, we should consider doing a multiyear contract so that we can save time and money, because it definitely is a supplier’s market.”

Smaller Hotels

Negotiating favorable deals for small events tends to be easier at smaller properties, where such groups represent a fair-sized piece of business. The onsite experience will tend to be better as well. “We like to use a hotel where it’s easy for our clients to find us. At a bigger hotel, it’s just more of an inconvenience for the client,” Kelman feels. In addition, some planners have experienced lapses in staff attention when meeting at an “oversized” hotel, or logistical challenges, when larger groups are in-house.

Perhaps attendees will have to navigate hallways with thousands of conventioners in order to find their meeting room, or that room will not be available on schedule because it is still being reconfigured from a breakout that ran late. “And then you have managers that are apologizing to you, and quite frankly all I say to them is, ‘I just want you to do your job,’” says Sky. “This is our contracted space, and we are supposed to have it now.”

Thus, she feels that “as a planner you want to ‘own’ the hotel, you want your meeting to be the biggest fish in that ocean because then you

know the staff there is going to focus on it. So you don’t want to take 80 people to Las Vegas to a hotel that holds 4,000; it’s going to be tough to get any attention.”

Planning Primer

Apart from the challenges in placing small meetings and negotiating the best deals for them, the programs themselves are typically far less complicated to plan than, say, an annual meeting or incentive trip. Fewer vendors and ancillary activities are involved, and the meetings usually will not call for a significant marketing push, theme, accompanying microsite or app, extensive ROI measurement, and other components that often characterize large meetings. For that reason, small meetings can make suitable projects for junior planners.

Ramsay currently works within a team of three senior-level planners, but she does feel that “if you’ve got a plan-

“As a planner you want to ‘own’ the hotel, you want your meeting to be the biggest fish in that ocean because then you know the staff there is going to focus on it.”



Kim Sky
Manager, Strategic Corporate Meetings & Events
CNA Financial Corp.
Chicago, IL

ner that’s not as seasoned as others on your team, driving some of the smaller programs toward that person helps acclimate them and get their feet wet, (since those meetings) are not as intimidating or overpowering.”

As insurance and financial companies continue to call for small gatherings to fulfill various objectives, planning teams may well find more opportunities for junior planners to come in and take the reins. **I&FMM**



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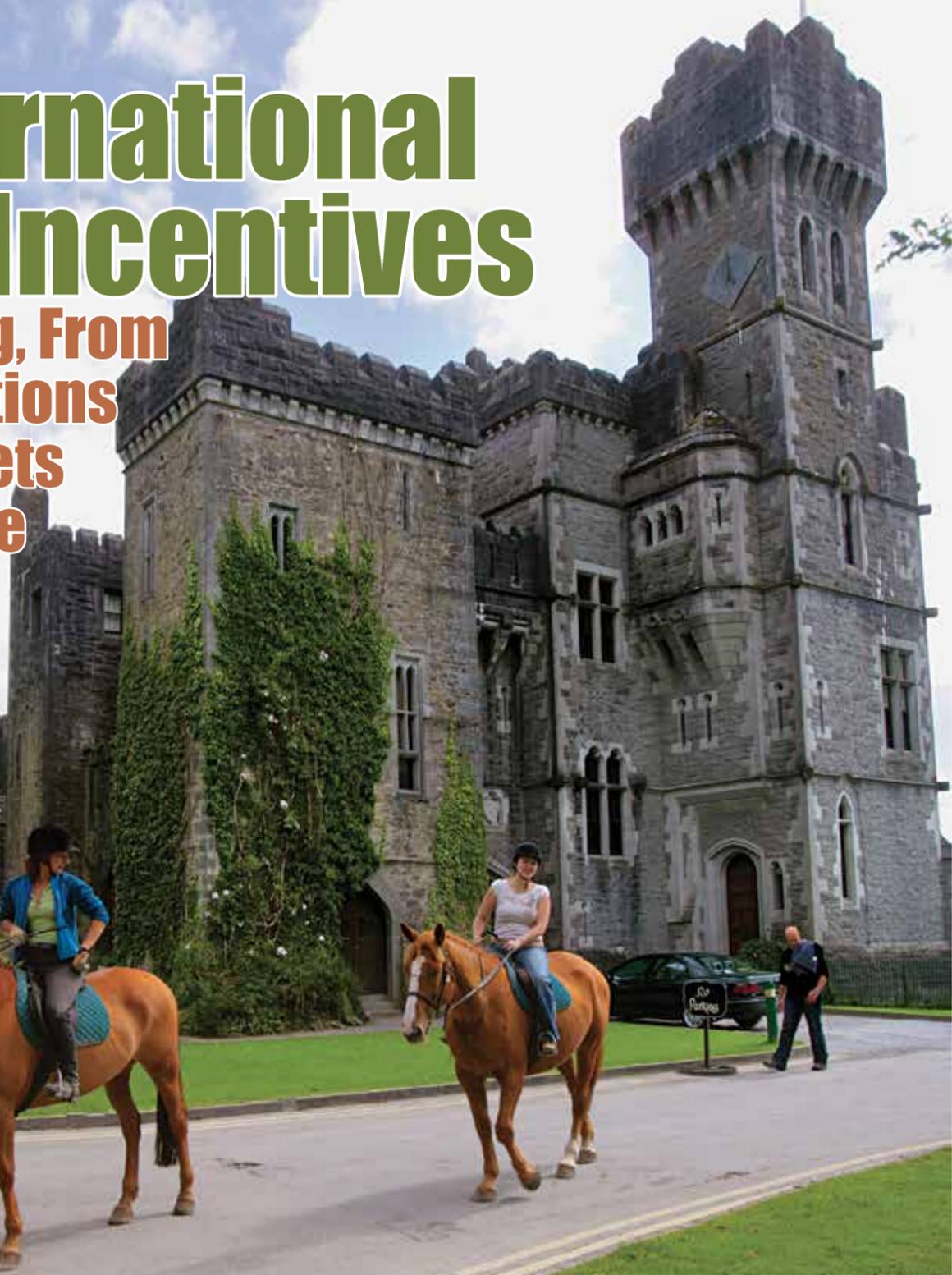
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International Incentives

What's Trending, From Destinations to Budgets and More

By Patrick Simms

Ashford Castle in Ireland, dating to 1228, completed a three-phase, property-wide restoration in March.



For the non-planner, cities such as Prague, Budapest and Salzburg perhaps do not immediately spring to mind when considering international destinations that would inspire sales reps to overachieve. More likely, one assumes that high-profile cities such as Paris and Rome would have that effect, or perhaps tropical getaways in Hawaii or the Caribbean. But today's

seasoned incentive planner faces an audience of insurance and financial reps that is more well-traveled each year, and these "second tier" European cities have actually shifted from being adventurous choices to reliable ones.

Europe in High Demand

Based on her discussions with peers and her own planning experiences,

Koleen Roach, director of meeting and conference management with St. Paul, Minnesota-based Securian Financial Group, notes that Prague, Budapest and Salzburg, as well as countries including Ireland and Portugal, have become "trustworthy, consistent incentive destinations that I like to call an 'ace in your back pocket.'" Every planner enjoys having the opportunity to do

an event at those destinations because they're oftentimes very well-received incentives by the qualifiers. They're exciting, historical countries, and many of them are English-speaking, which helps a lot."

And while many second-tier European cities are tried-and-true in the incentive market at this point, they are still "more likely to be new to program participants" than first-tier cities such as London, Paris and Rome, notes Jennifer Mazza, senior manager travel accounts with New Brunswick, New Jersey-based Dittman Incentive Marketing, 30 percent of whose clientele are insurance and financial companies. "From a

Prague, Budapest, Salzburg...are "trustworthy, consistent incentive destinations that I like to call an 'ace in your back pocket.' ...They are exciting, historical countries."

**Koleen Roach, Director of Meeting and Conference Management
Securian Financial Group, St. Paul, MN**



planning perspective, this provides an opportunity to create unexpected and memorable events and experiences."

Europe in general appears to be enjoying high demand these days in the incentive market. Jackie Fox, senior manager global development with Salt Lake City, Utah-based Morris Meetings & Incentives, says she is seeing "Europe coming back; the exchange rate is making it more and more doable for us and we're having a lot more (clients express) interest in Europe. I always get requests for Ireland, for example."

One of the Emerald Isle's major attractions for incentive groups has always been its castles, many of which offer lodging and are rentable for private events. The 82-room Ashford Castle, dating to 1228, is in the news lately as it completed a three-phase, property-wide restoration in March. To further promote business tourism, the country offers a range of practical and financial support for incentive groups.

For many U.S. groups, however, travel time is a consideration that can weigh in favor of "closer to home" international destinations. "Programs that

are only four or five nights long stay closer to home to keep travel time reasonable relative to the program length," observes Mazza, whose company is currently planning incentive trips to Cancun and Quebec City. "Groups with limited time but who have interest in international destinations are increasingly turning to Mexico and Canada. And as always, the Caribbean remains strong."

Budget Concerns

Mazza also observes that while "budgets among insurance and financial programs are trending slowly

up, they are not keeping pace with the rate increases we see in the hospitality industry. Hotel and airline occupancy rates are very high, driving prices even higher." This is an important dynamic to bear in mind: Planners who find themselves with bigger budgets to work with may set out to arrange an international program in lieu of a domestic one, only to find the greater funds are offset by higher rates. "For many programs, particularly incentives, budgets are often set more than a year in advance, usually based on the previous year. Unfortunately, this is not realistic in the current market," Mazza notes.

Thus, it remains critical to be resourceful with budgets, even if they have increased in some cases. "I have to be very thoughtful about how to provide a great experience as an incentive and as a reward for our guests without blowing the budget," Roach says. For international programs, second-tier destinations can be a resource for cost control, in addition to their inherent attractiveness. "Second-tier cities are somewhat less frequented

by leisure travelers. This can result in lower hotel and food and beverage rates," Mazza points out.

Safety and Security

The range of potential international programs that would stay within budget is of course very broad, and there is much work for a planner to do in narrowing down the destination options to the handful that will be presented to upper management. Safety and security are always paramount criteria.

"It's a changing world out there, and it's a big part of a meeting planner's job now, especially those of us who are involved in international travel, to really assess the risk," Roach says. "I spend a lot of time on the U.S. Department of State website researching locations and destinations to make sure they are safe, that no travel warnings

have been issued, no terror cells have been identified as existing around that area and so on." That website is an indispensable step in the research process: "Everything is on that website for any place you want to visit, from currency to language to religion to population," she adds.

The Destination Decision

Toward determining the "short list" of destinations, Roach also takes into account input from three groups of people: Securian's upper management and potential qualifiers, as well as her industry connections. "One of the things that our management is really



The Parliament Building in Budapest.

Australia and the South Pacific Islands

While the airfares can be substantial for U.S. and Canadian groups, incentive trips to the Asia-Pacific region make qualifiers feel like they are escaping to a remote corner of the globe. Many insurance and financial groups take advantage of this factor. Indeed, about 40 percent of Geneva, Switzerland-based Ovation Australia's incentive clientele are in these sectors, "and we expect to see this grow over the next 12-24 months," says Sonja Söderbom, director. She feels that Australia's strength as an incentive destination lies in its diversity. "The country offers true diversity, with multicultural cities, deserts, coral reefs, rainforests, beautiful beaches and hidden gems found in every corner."

the islands that comprise the Whitsundays, or the perfectly quaint and relaxing village of Port Douglas, with both offering a gateway to the breathtaking world of the Great Barrier Reef, lush tropical rainforests, and access to experiences that explore the indigenous culture and history of the land."

Ovation Australia once designed an incentive program for a bank that featured an exclusive sailing regatta on Sydney's harbor, incorporating many of the city's icons, including the Harbour Bridge, Opera House and Fort Denison. "We delivered an extravaganza evening that had a 'Taste of Sydney' theme, starting with a sunset cruise aboard a luxury vessel for pre-dinner drinks, before arriving at the Sydney Opera House for an evening showcasing the very best local produce and wine, accompanied by traditional Australian entertainment," Söderbom relates. "With the itinerary also taking in a visit to tropical Hamilton Island in the Whitsundays, the client asked us to create a bespoke teambuilding activity that enabled the delegates to interact with and enjoy the beautiful landscape. As a result, we facilitated a golf buggy race around the island to take in all the sights and incorporated clues based on key internal messages. The combination of fun and enjoyment with company learnings brought the activity back to the organization's business objectives, while also giving the delegates an experience they'll never forget."

French Polynesia

Securian Financial Group's excursion to French Polynesia brought two groups to Bora Bora, one group to Moorea and another group to Papeete, Tahiti, where they embarked on an eight-day, seven-night Paul Gauguin cruise. "We found out that French Polynesia was truly a 'bucket list' destination for most people," remarks Koleen Roach, director of meeting and con-



French Polynesia

ference management. "People qualified for this trip who have never qualified for an international program before, so it really creates a lot of stir and a lot of buzz, so much so that originally it was just supposed to be the top tier in Moorea for four days and three nights, and the cruise for the larger group. But we had so many people qualify for the cruise that we had to pull two groups off of the ship and give them land programs in Bora Bora. But the land programs in Bora Bora were equally well-received opportunities for those qualifiers. At the end of the day, every single person that went to French Polynesia, whether they did Bora Bora, Moorea or just the cruise, enjoyed the trip." She worked with Tahiti Nui Travel, a DMC specializing in incentive travel.

Fiji

The South Pacific is also home to Fiji, an archipelago of more than 332 islands. Viti Levu, the main island, is the location of the capital city of Suva as well as the Intercontinental Fiji Golf Resort & Spa, where Morris Meetings & Incentives coordinated an incentive program for a major Canadian insur-

ance company. "My biggest challenge was finding something large enough to host a group of about 450," recalls Jackie Fox, senior manager global development with Morris. The 266-room InterContinental offers a pillarless ballroom that accommodated the entire group, who mainly stayed onsite for the program. "The hotel has a very nicely groomed golf course, where we had a tournament," Fox says. "We also had a welcome reception and awards ceremony outdoors, including a barbecue on the beach." There are, however, plenty of offsite activities in Fiji, including snorkeling in Natadola Bay, exploring Kula Eco Park, sampling the local foods at the Sigatoka markets, and experiencing local crafts at Nakabuta Pottery Village. Morris Meetings & Incentives' client did venture offsite to a local village about 20 minutes from the resort,

"where we did some voluntary work with children and helped with a little school there in the village," Fox says. This kind of activity is not only personally fulfilling, but also adds an educational component to a reward program: "Corporate social responsibility events can not only support organizational values, but can also shed light on the challenges faced by another country or region," notes Jennifer Mazza, senior manager travel accounts, Dittman Incentive Marketing. — PS



Fiji

Great Barrier Reef

Australia

Given that diversity, Söderbom recommends multi-destination trips for incentive clients. "The combination of Sydney and the Great Barrier Reef is hard to beat and really provides a perfect snapshot of what Australia has to offer," she says. "With Sydney, you have the sophistication of a cosmopolitan city that offers an iconic skyline, incredible venues, beautiful scenery, some of the best restaurants in the world and luxury hotels. Then juxtaposed with that you have the tropical paradise of



kept on these days is the airlift — how many flights it is going to take to get there — because they want it to be one connection and done," she notes.

Post-event surveys help to gather site selection feedback from Securian's well-traveled qualifiers: "We ask what are some future destinations that they would be interested in and would consider an incentive toward their performance goals," she says. "So I'm always looking at those comments that we get back from our field, and of course those suggestions are as varied and wide as the opportunities out there."

Further counsel comes from Roach's colleagues, via "networking with my peers

through FICP, or spending time at IMEX in Las Vegas."

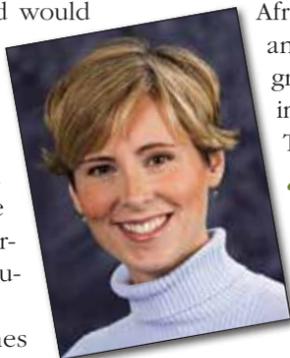
As a general rule, variety is important: Over the past 10 years, Securian has achieved a good mix of urban and coastal locales, and has staged trips to several different continents and islands: Sydney in 2005, Malta in 2007, Africa in 2009 (Cape Town and Livingston split program), Santiago and Cuzco in 2011, Prague in 2013 and Tahiti this year. The pro-

grams are attended by approximately 300–350 qualifiers, spouses and significant others.

Incorporate the Unexpected

Destination choice must be coupled with the kinds of local experiences that will leave a lasting impact. Roach gives a few examples: "With our Chairman's Club in Cuzco, one of the things I was able to do for the group was charter the entire Orient Express train and bring everybody into Machu Picchu. Most

"Budgets among insurance and financial programs are trending slowly up, (but) they are not keeping pace with the rate increases we see in the hospitality industry."



Jennifer Mazza, Senior Manager Travel Accounts
Dittman Incentive Marketing, New Brunswick, NJ

people going there on their own probably wouldn't take the Orient Express; they'd probably take a smaller standard commuter train that goes in and out of the citadel.

"In Sydney, something you wouldn't normally do on your own is a big regatta with the champion sailboats. And in Tahiti, two hours swimming with sharks and snorkeling some of the most beautiful coral reefs you've ever seen, and then swimming with stingrays."

Says Mazza, "It is very important to provide opportunities for guests to get out of the ballrooms and off-property to experience the unique aspects of a destination firsthand. Whether visiting the open-air markets of Paris or diving in to meet the local fauna at Sting Ray City in the Cayman Islands, some experiences just cannot be found anywhere else."

Integrating cultural elements is also important: "Many cultures are expressed through their cuisine, and we recommend integrating local flavors, sourced regionally, wherever possible," she adds. "Events can also include local entertainment, bringing the traditional culture, language and sound to life. This can include flamenco in Spain, ballet folklorico in Mexico or junkanoo in the Bahamas."

The Next Great Destination

As planners continue to explore new destinations for international incentives, they are not only catalyzing their company's salesforce to perform — in addition, they are effectively contributing to the tourism economies of a greater variety of countries. "Even though Securian has been going in-

ternational for about 30 years now, frankly there are still some places we haven't been to, and there aren't too many destinations that we've repeated," Roach notes.

The improved U.S. economy also calls for an ongoing effort to ensure employees are incentivized.

"As the economic recovery continues and talent is increasingly hard to retain, clients are focused on remaining the employer-of-choice and on connecting with their employees' personal aspirations," says Mazza. "That often means they are looking for the newest thing to generate excitement, and to keep the focus on the organizational goals required to earn a place on the trip." A less-trodden international locale may well be the "newest thing" that does the trick. **I&FMM**

America's Southwest

One Region, Many Settings & Personalities

By Christine Loomis

Sure, you can lump it all together into one region and call it the Southwest. But this area of the United States is wildly diverse in almost every way. Landscapes differ, prices and amenities come in a huge range, cultures and weather vary, towns and cities have distinct, identifiable personalities, and the reasons for meeting here are as limitless as sunset across the Western sky.

Here are three states, each one defining an engaging brand of Southwest meeting.

ARIZONA

GREATER PHOENIX

Phoenix has lured discerning travelers for decades with its idyllic winter weather and expansive resorts. The Arizona Biltmore and The Wigwam opened their doors in 1929. Today those resorts still flourish, but downtown Phoenix also is in revival mode, and the city is a full-on, year-round destination.

Encore Capital Group has met in Phoenix before and wanted to return to the area for its December 2014 meeting. This time around, The Phoenician fit the bill.

"The client was seeking a hideaway for its board of directors meeting,"

says Nancy Nachman, CMM, CMP and founder of The Meetings Concierge, who brings many groups to the area. "They requested a luxury property with dining options, a spa and golf, which led us to The Phoenician. Although a small group, they like to be at a property that is large enough to offer a range of amenities and options. The Phoenician has a gorgeous boardroom with windows and a great view of the city."

Nachman, who worked in the hotel industry at top brands before founding The Meetings Concierge, understands what groups need and has a long list of what excels at The Phoenician. "Incredible service, location, privacy, accommodations and the boardroom are all standouts," she says.

Additionally, the group met off-property at Steak 44 on N. 44th Street in Phoenix. "Steak 44 is awesome and has a couple of private dining rooms as well," Nachman says.

She calls travel in and out of Phoenix "super easy," a bonus for out-of-state attendees. But the highlight was The Phoenician and its staff. "If you are seeking the finest luxury hotel, it doesn't get much better than The Phoenician. Other luxury brands exist but this resort, hands down, still is the leader."

Scottsdale, northeast of Phoenix, is sophisticated and surprisingly eclectic. When Michelle A. Wiltgen, assistant vice president and national marketing manager for National Interstate Insurance Company, wanted a set-

ting for the Spring 2015 Venture and National Accounts meeting with about 130 attendees, Scottsdale was the choice.

"What we love about Scottsdale other than the climate," Wiltgen says, "is that the city is friendly and accessible. We look for venues that are easy in and out (airport), easy to get around and have plenty of things to do. Scottsdale fits every criteria."

The meeting was based at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Gainey Ranch. "I sited several properties for this joint meeting," Wiltgen says. "Factors considered were room rates, room product, meeting space, overall value, quality and service levels as well as the overall feel of the property. I know all of our attendees personally as we have been meeting with them biannually for several years. I look for properties that I think our attendees would like and be comfortable at."

"What stood out to me was first of all how beautiful the property is, but more specifically, the room product was very nice as well as the meeting space (windows are always a plus) and the venues for meals — we prefer outdoor spaces, and the Hyatt has several."

The group used the Arizona Ballroom for meetings and several outdoor spaces including the Palm Grove, Upper Pool Deck, Lawn Court, Terrace Court and South Foyer/Desert Garden — all at the Hyatt. Wiltgen calls them "beautiful and inviting spaces that fit our group but would have also been able to accommodate many more."

The resort also delivered on food and service. "We used the Hyatt for all food functions," Wiltgen notes, "and the service and food were excellent. We had everything from plated to buffet to stations for different meals. All events were handled professionally, on time and the service staff could not have been more accommodating. Our guests felt welcomed and comfortable."

This was essential for this meeting because of its setup. "Because our meetings don't have much ac-

tivity time, we place a big emphasis on the F&B and venues used," Wiltgen says. "I have never liked the concept of the 'meal room,' and this property has several options for menus and venues we could utilize that didn't require a lot of additional lighting (or expense), were beautiful and had that wow factor we were looking for."

The group also met for meals outside the hotel. "We had two events utilizing outside venues," Wiltgen says. "One was a small dinner for approximately 20 at Mastro's City Hall, a very elegant dinner that was handled with the highest level of customer service and professionalism. The other was with Western Destinations in Black Canyon City. It was a fabulous, active event including horseback riding, skeet and other activities."

It's always a bonus for planners when expectations are not only met but exceeded, which was the case for Wiltgen at the Hyatt. "Keep in mind, our meeting had very little activity time so the meals were a highlight and the Hyatt didn't disappoint," she says. "As planners know, hotel sales and marketing staff tell you what their hotel can do, why you should choose them and how great a job they are going to do. While it has been my experience that most of the time my expectation-

sare met, I was pleasantly surprised that the service level at the Hyatt exceeded my expectations. Every person that interacted with our group was pleasant and professional and really took ownership of our group and our experience. I also was pleasantly surprised with the quality of the food and presentation."

This wasn't the first time Wiltgen has brought National Interstate Insurance groups to Scottsdale. "We have probably had five to 10 meetings in the Scottsdale area over the past 10 years and have two more planned for next year," she says. "While our groups pick where we meet, they repeat with Scottsdale because they are comfortable coming here for several reasons. Not only are there great options for all size groups and price ranges (we have utilized several different properties), our groups appreciate the ease of getting to Scottsdale and they feel safe moving around the city."

"There are plenty of things to do for people who come in early or stay late that range from less active to the most active," she continues. "We have several age groups so we have to take this into consideration. Additionally, our experience with the (Scottsdale) CVB has been one of the best in the country from a planning standpoint. We utilize

"What stood out to me was first of all how beautiful the property is...we prefer outdoor spaces, and the Hyatt has several."



Michelle A. Wiltgen
A.V.P., National Marketing Manager
National Interstate Insurance Company
Richfield, OH

The 493-room Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Gainey Ranch has 70,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, and a 2.5-acre water playground.

CVBs in many cities. There are not many who exceed our expectations in assisting with our meetings.”

Another planner favorite in Scottsdale is the AAA Four Diamond, Native American-owned Talking Stick Resort on the Salt River-Pima Maricopa Indian Reservation. The 496-room resort offers nearly every must-have amenity for corporate groups: golf at the adjacent Talking Stick Golf Club; The Spa at Talking Stick, a 13,000-sf open-air venue on the 14th floor that highlights products made with ingredients that are culturally significant to the Pima-Maricopa Indians; gaming at the on-site casino; a 650-seat Showroom; and 100,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting space.

Distinctive among the 11 restaurants and lounges is the signature restaurant Orange Sky, located on the 15th floor with floor-to-ceiling windows and available for private events.



The Orange Sky patio at Talking Stick Resort offers vast desert vistas.

during free time is Tlaquepaque, the popular arts and crafts village with excellent shopping and dining. The village is undergoing an expansion with completion expected in early 2016. The result should be even more options for planners and attendees.

NEW MEXICO

ALBUQUERQUE

Centrally located, Albuquerque is set along the Rio Grande at the foot of the Sandia Mountains. Among major cities in the United States, it has one of the highest elevations, ranging from nearly 5,000 feet above sea level along the river to 6,700 feet in the foothills.

Considering Albuquerque's rich cultural heritage, the area was a fitting choice for Wells Fargo's Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion Conference last summer, with 200 attendees taking part. The meeting was based at Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort and Spa, about 30 minutes from the Albuquerque airport, a resort offering an ideal combination of ease of access and seclusion.

“The big draw was that the resort is on sacred pueblo land and is owned by the Pueblo of Santa Ana,” says Adelle Heinz, Wells Fargo's V.P., meeting and event planner, enterprise meetings and events. “That unique business model and the Native American culture experiences really added to our meeting. The meeting was focused on diversity and inclusion. The fact that the hotel is Native American-owned carried

through the message being discussed in our meetings.”

Also pertinent to the meeting theme, each participant received a corn necklace greeting upon arrival at Tamaya, a tradition within the Santa Ana Pueblo. “We also had a flute performance by William, a tribal member, which also made our evening events special and unique,” Heinz says.

“The other key aspect,” she adds, “was the solitude and outstanding natural setting. Being so remote kept our people together and focused on each other and teambuilding, so the meetings were productive and on-task. The hotel is absolutely gorgeous and the grounds are beautiful!”

Because the resort is outside the city, all aspects of the meeting took place on hotel grounds, but that didn't mean lack of variety. “We were not staring at the same four walls of a windowless ballroom day after day,” Heinz says. “The resort offers tons of venues and variety, each one better than the next. We were at Oxbow Pool for dinner and did a reception in the House of the Hummingbird within a butterfly garden. We had an event at the Corn Maiden restaurant. There is also the Cottonwoods Pavilion along the Rio Grande that I was dying to use, but we ended up not using that space. Long story short, we were very happy with all the options we had onsite. Every place that I went on-property was fabulous. There were so many great spaces. It's really nice to break up the meeting spaces yet remain intact at the same time.”

Heinz also describes the resort's

venues as “plentiful and not too spread out, so the participants never have trouble finding their room or getting to the next breakout session on time.”

The food was definitely a hit. “We do a survey after each meeting and everybody raved about the food,” Heinz says. “I've done hundreds of meetings in the past 14 years. People are constantly referring back to this meeting saying, ‘Remember the food we had at the Hyatt Regency? That is what we want again.’ The chefs at Tamaya are innovative and prepared tasty breakfasts, lunches and dinners. The food was delicious with lots of healthy choices. It's true that many hotels are starting to pay attention to (healthy options), but it's not across the board — especially in the Northeastern and Midwestern states where the entrées can be very heavy and fatty. We were blown away by the food.”

Native American cultural events were a major part of the activities available to attendees, and there was

a chile-roasting demonstration, too. Activities also were built around giving back to the community. “Corporate social responsibility is usually a part of our meetings,” Heinz says, noting that it was even more important for this meeting given that it was focused around leadership and diversity. Client experience, teambuilding and giving team members who are spread across the country face-to-face time were also a focus, and all of these elements were served by programs designed to help others.

“Coming together to help those in need really brings everyone together,” Heinz says. “Doing good builds team moral and creates similar experiences that teams can build off of.”

The group engaged in several CSR activities. “We did donations and worked with PBJ Family Services in Albuquerque to help purchase a bookcase and children's books. We partnered with Bernalillo Schools in Bernalillo, New Mexico, putting to-

gether teacher packs for the coming school year. And we made donations to the Stables at Tamaya horse rehabilitation program. We toured the horse rehab facility and were able to rescue an abandoned horse — our donation saved his life. It was wonderful to have a CSR activity right at Tamaya.”

When all was said and done, the only regret Heinz had was being unable to use the resort's Cottonwood Pavilion because of the group's number. “I'd go back no question about it,” she says.

In general, Heinz's advice to planners is, “Find a property that aligns with your goals and values and offers a unique experience that everyone will remember...and consider the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa. It worked out just perfect for us,” she says.

SANTA FE

It's a beguiling mix. Art, Spanish and American history, and ancient

“The meeting was focused on diversity and inclusion.

The fact that (Hyatt Regency Tamaya) is Native American-owned carried through the message being discussed in our meetings.”

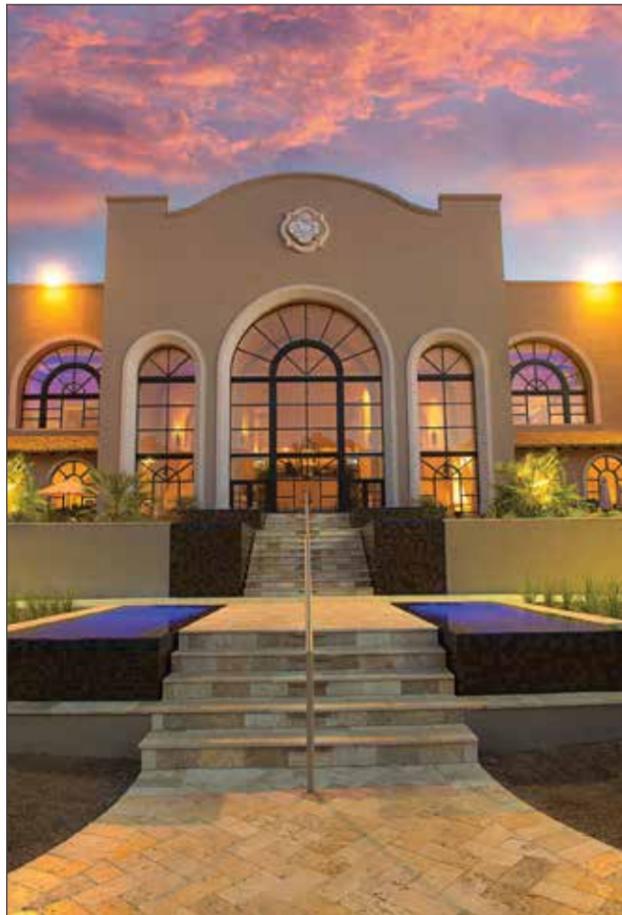


Adelle Heinz
V.P., Meeting & Event Planner
Wells Fargo
Charlotte, NC

The casino-level lounge, Palo Verde, was expanded last year.

SEDONA

Largely defined by striking red and pink rocks and high-desert terrain, Sedona is a place of seductive beauty. It lends itself to privacy and a feeling of getting away from it all, yet it's just a two-hour drive from Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. In town, one of the biggest draws for attendees



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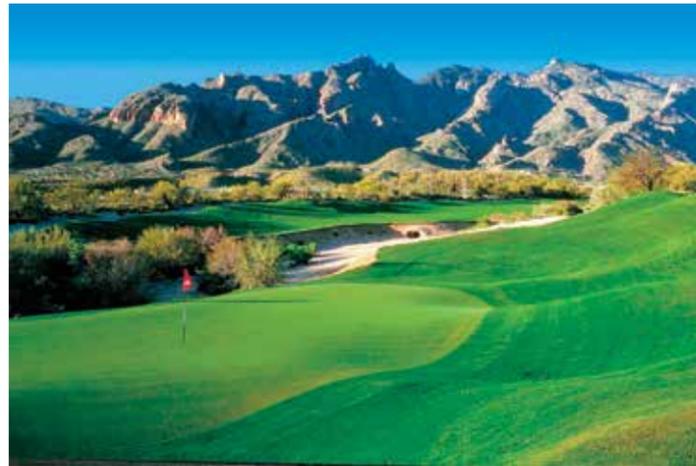


Nancy Nachman, CMM, CMP
Owner
The Meetings Concierge
Scottsdale, AZ

yet to come, not the least of which is a new convention center currently slated to open in 2019.

Meanwhile, the current Cox Convention Center provides more than 1 million sf of meeting and exhibition space, and downtown Oklahoma City offers several engaging entertainment and dining areas, including Bricktown, Automobile Alley and Film Row. A variety of cultural attractions add value to meetings here, perhaps especially the powerful and moving Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. Along the Oklahoma River at the southern edge of downtown, the Boathouse District offers space for meetings and teambuilding activities. New to the district is the CHK/Central Boathouse with indoor and outdoor

and contemporary Native American culture all combine to give Santa Fe a distinctive ambience. The city offers groups a rich cultural backdrop that enhances meetings and free time. And though history informs much of the city, Santa Fe is still evolving. Last August, Drury Plaza Hotel opened — the first new hotel in downtown in 18 years. This May, Chef John Sedlar opened Eloisa at the hotel, creating a menu that pays homage to the Southwest cuisine of his childhood and to his grandmother, who cooked for Georgia O’Keeffe. In June, Bar Alta opened, the hotel’s new rooftop venue with impressive views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Other restaurants recently opened include Radishes & Rye, Taberna and Paper Dosa.



High-desert golf at The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa in Tucson.

Credit: The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa

rentable space. And in 2016, a white-water rafting facility will open, providing even more options for teambuilding and bonding.

The Southwest is endlessly alluring but decidedly not all the same. From urban sophistication to extraordinary rural settings, the Southwest delivers a diverse meetings menu for planners to choose from — over and over again.

The Southwest is endlessly alluring but decidedly not all the same. From urban sophistication to extraordinary rural settings, the Southwest delivers a diverse meetings menu for planners to choose from — over and over again.

New & Noteworthy

Phoenix. The Arizona Biltmore, a Waldorf Astoria Resort, completed a major renovation in November to modernize and refine accommoda-

tions and public spaces while preserving the historic architecture and design for which it is known.

The stellar Musical Instrument Museum added 3,400 sf of event space to its existing space. The renovation included the addition of three private meeting rooms, each with full AV capability. Total indoor and outdoor function space is 40,000 sf.

Scottsdale. Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center began a renovation July 1. In September, the property will unveil its updated look, a new restaurant and new function space along with a new name: The Scottsdale Resort at McCormick Ranch, a Destination Hotel.

Tucson. Loews Hotels & Resorts purchased Loews Ventana Canyon Resort in November, which it had been managing since 1984. The resort will undergo a significant renovation this year.

The Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa completed a \$30 million rejuvenation of public spaces and private rooms and upgraded its banquet amenities. The 60,000-sf conference space received new carpeting and AV equipment among other upgrades.

Santa Fe. In June, the Eldorado Hotel & Spa announced completion of an extensive renovation that includes a new 7,000-sf ballroom — the city’s largest — with a sophisticated, programmable LED lighting system.

Rosewood Inn of the Anasazi redesigned its Anasazi Restaurant and Bar including an added lounge area and dedicated tequila table.

Oklahoma City. In Bricktown, construction is set to start this fall on a Hyatt Place and an AC Hotel, the European brand that’s part of Marriott. Also on tap is a 21C Museum Hotel at the edge of Film Row, currently under construction and scheduled to open in 2016 in a renovated historic building that once housed a Model T assembly plant.

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BOND



MARSELLA



TAYLOR



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BRIGHT

Christopher Bond was named vice president of sales for The Mirage in Las Vegas. He most recently served as vice president of sales for New York – New York Hotel & Casino.

Jay Marsella was named director of sales and marketing for the Marriott Marquis Houston. He was director of sales and marketing for the Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort & Spa.

Hawks Cay Resort, Villas and Marina in Duck Key, Florida, has named **Corinne**

Whittington as director of national accounts. She was account director at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa in South Carolina.

Alison Taylor was named senior vice president of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide's sales organization. She previously developed the Starwood sales organization in Asia-Pacific.

Omni Barton Creek Resort & Spa near Austin, Texas, has named **Greg Schneider** as manager of sales for the Midwest market. He was di-

rector of group sales for Lakeway Resort in Austin.

The Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, named **Dan McCarron** as director of sales and marketing. He was the Northeast market account leader for the company.

Diana Bright was named director of national accounts for Santa Barbara Beach & Golf Resort in Curacao. She was account director, Northeast, for the St. Regis Aspen Resort Hotel in Colorado. **I&FMM**

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