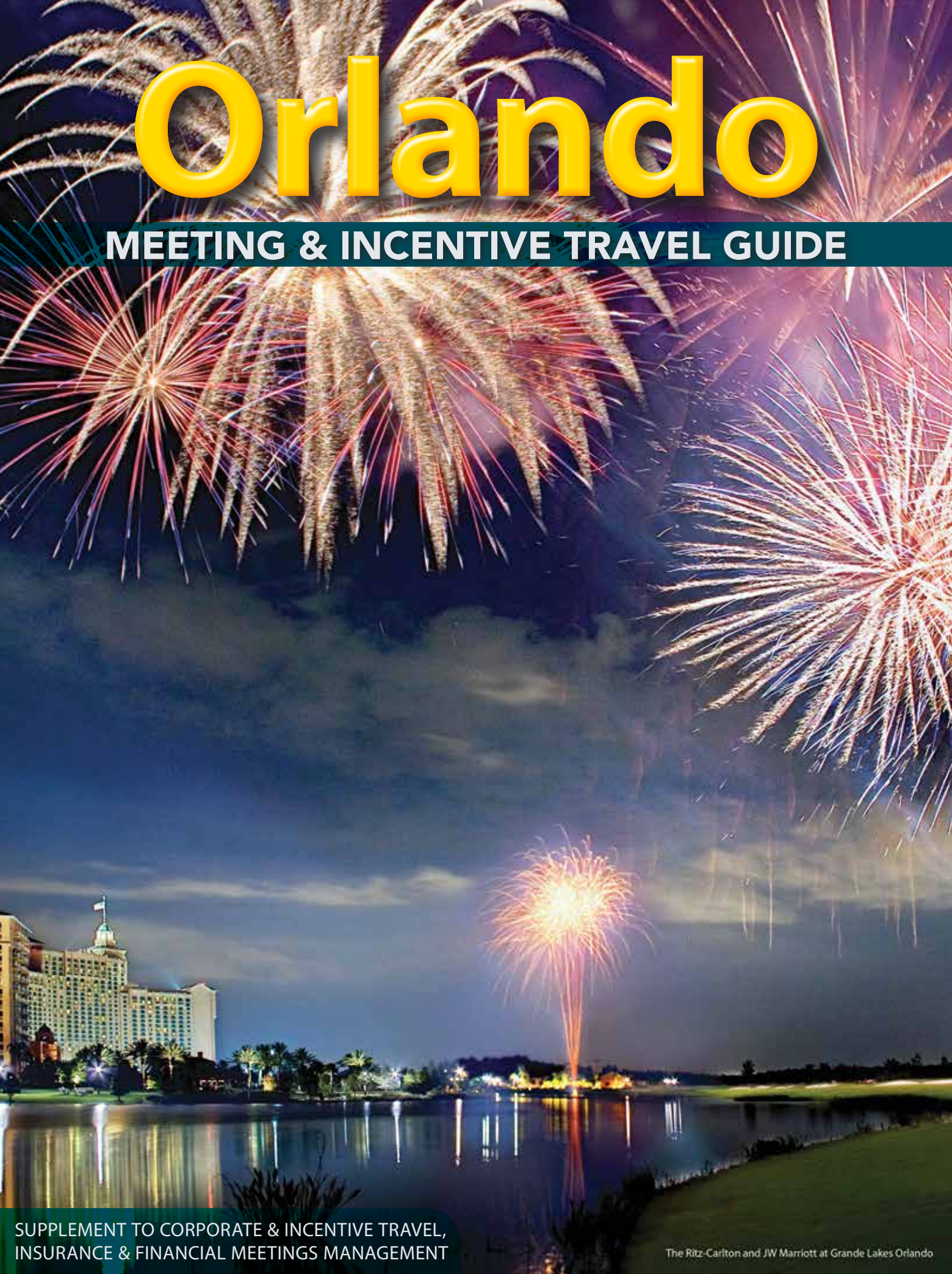


# Orlando

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Orlando  
No.1 for  
Meetings

## Visit Orlando's Long-Term Vision Guides the City to Top Status

By John Buchanan

Although a handful of U.S. meeting destinations claim top-dog status on any given day, Cvent made it official once again in August that Orlando is, in fact, the No. 1 meeting destination in the country for 2015. And that lofty ranking is not the result of a planner survey or subjective opinion. It is the result of hard statistics, based on Cvent's analysis of factors that include, among others, the number of RFPs received and total room nights booked.

"We are honored to be named the No. 1 meeting destination in the country by Cvent," says Visit Orlando President and CEO George Aguel. "The recognition is a testament to the investment we make in marketing and selling Orlando as the ideal location for meetings and conventions at all levels."

In achieving that status, Orlando has had a unique and longstanding advantage. Thanks to its major theme parks — Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando and SeaWorld Orlando — and related list of world-class amenities, the city has ranked for many years as the No. 1 family vacation destination in the world.

### Family-Friendly Foundation

And that factor became even more important after the recession of 2008–2010, when more and more meetings began to attract family members along with attendees.

Today, that simple reality is a foundational element in the ever-growing appeal of the destination among meeting planners.

"That trend existed even before the recession, but since then it has continued to an even greater extent," says Aguel, a former senior executive at Disney before he assumed his new role at Visit Orlando in 2013. "For us, one

*"When you get right down to it, what we really want to do is help planners find the right way to get their meeting done."*

George Aguel  
President and CEO  
Visit Orlando



of the silver linings of the dark cloud of the recession was that as a result of the reputation we already enjoyed as a family destination, we were able to see some benefit from the effects of the recession in that way." Beyond that, in the highly competitive, post-recession meetings market, Orlando also has a very compelling sales pitch for meeting planners, Aguel says. "Among the things we use most to sell the destination to meeting planners is our diverse portfolio of hotels. We have hotels that meet every kind of need and every kind of budget." Orlando now offers more than 450 hotels, with a total of more than 118,000 rooms. Represented among that inventory is virtually every major brand, from luxury properties to mid-market and more budget-conscious options.



# Orlando No.1 for Meetings



The Orlando Eye observation wheel is the centerpiece to the new I-Drive 360 dining and entertainment complex.

"In addition to our hotels, we also talk about the benefits of our geography, including our climate," Aguel says. "When you come to Orlando for a meeting, you don't have to worry about the implications of weather, especially in winter. During that time, where weather could be a (negative) factor elsewhere, it is not a factor here. It is a positive."

## Airlift

Yet another factor that has made Orlando so popular as a meeting destination — and another one related to its status as a vacation destination — is its airlift and highly acclaimed airport.

"We talk a lot about our airlift, at favorable price points, especially from the discount carriers, and the quality of our airport. Our airport is one of the most recognized airports in the world for its layout and proximity to the convention district."

In addition to such practical matters, Visit Orlando constantly stresses its exceptional commitment to corporate meetings. "We talk about the levels of service and support

that we offer. We have additional resources, too, such as the terrific representation we have from literally every major hotel brand and the extent of our dining and entertainment product. For example, two great options along International Drive include The Pointe and the new I-Drive 360 complex, both with numerous restaurants and shops. There's also an area we call Restaurant Row, along Sand Lake Road near the Orange County Convention Center, with restaurants for every taste," Aguel says.

In other words, Orlando is literally built for meetings. But it's also never satisfied with the status quo and is perpetually questing for expansion and improvement.

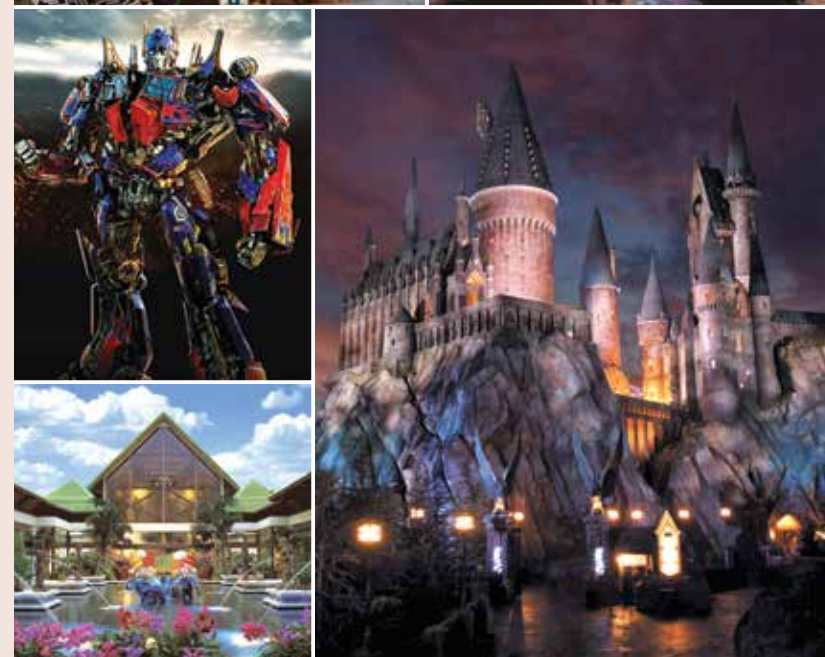
## The Vision Continues

Despite the city's growth and evolution as a meeting destination, particularly since the recession and the meeting industry downturn of six years ago, Visit Orlando and its members have continued to develop an even bigger and better long-term vision for meetings and conventions.

A key element of that long-term vision is the afore-



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# Orlando No.1 for Meetings

mentioned I-Drive 360, a retail, dining and entertainment complex opened in May along International Drive near the Orange County Convention Center. The complex is anchored by a 400-foot-tall observation wheel known as The Orlando Eye, and new venues including a Madame Tussauds Orlando and a Sea Life Orlando aquarium. The project also includes a host of new restaurants including Tin Roof Orlando, Naru Sushi Orlando, Bar Jour, Café de Paris, Sugar Factory Orlando, Yard House, Cowgirls Rock-Bar Orlando and Shake Shack.

The more long-term vision for the convention center district is still in its early stages. The interest in an even broader and bolder development initiative came from feedback generated directly from meeting and convention planners who are loyal customers of Orlando. "And they tell us very clearly," Aguel says, "that as they see the destination evolving, they see that there are opportunities to make the destination even better, especially along what we call the 'convention corridor' along International Drive."

Actual development and implementation of the initiative will take several years, Aguel says. "But we have been having great conversations and planning sessions where we talk about what the eventual outcome of that effort could look like," he says. "And as that process continues, more and more stakeholders will be brought in. But the goal is to have those conversations and develop a real vision for the next evolution of the area."

Another major initiative now coming to fruition is the transformation of the Downtown Disney dining, entertainment and shopping complex into Disney Springs, which will feature an even broader array of options. "That was actually my last project for Disney before I moved over to Visit Orlando as president and CEO. So, knowing it as intimately as I do, it is going to be a very significant addition to Orlando as a world-class destination. It is going to include amazing restaurants and entertainment and retail shopping options. And for the most part, the scope of it is not even something most people are even aware of yet."

Finally, Aguel notes, in addition to its constant evolution and improvement as a destination, Orlando offers an essential benefit that is increasingly being demanded in today's highly competitive meetings market: an exceptional value proposition.

And again, that important advantage is based on its stature as a globally beloved family vacation destination,



Pointe Orlando offers shopping, dining and entertainment.

a factor that gives it a breadth of infrastructure and hotel inventory that allows meeting planners to extract exceptional value, especially at certain times of the year, such as shoulder seasons. "And at the same time, you see that a number of other destinations that are very popular, such as New York or San Francisco, are also known for the fact that if you go there, you are going to be paying a lot of money. But because we are a family destination, we try hard to make Orlando affordable for anyone who wants to come here to be able to do so, including meeting planners that have to meet a budget."

## The Role of Visit Orlando

Yet another factor in Orlando's evolution has been the longstanding recognition of Visit Orlando as one of the top CVBs in the country.

"Visit Orlando is a great representation of the special brand of culturally embedded hospitality that you get in Orlando, which comes with the destination," Aguel says. "And that really matters, because tourism and meetings are the No. 1 economic driver for Orlando. So as a result of that, everyone in Orlando has a real commitment to that business. Everyone in town knows that the visitors we get are very, very important to us as a destination."

The vital role that Visit Orlando plays is primarily based on branding and marketing the destination, Aguel says. "We give planners an inside track to understanding the destination. Orlando is a very extensive community for planners to navigate, so we like to be the organization that helps them understand and navigate it. But when you get right down to it, what we really want to do is help planners find the right way to get their meeting done."

And the role of a CVB today is even more important because of the ongoing budget cuts put in place since the recession, according to Aguel. "Because a lot of organizations do have reduced budgets and resources internally, they also now have greater need for information and materials and knowledge that help them plan their meeting," he says. "And they often need marketing support. We provide them with all of those things. But ultimately, we see our job as helping them to have the best possible experience they can have and also to get the most for their money that they possibly can."

ORLANDO

# Orlando Meeting Hotels



Loews Royal Pacific at Universal Orlando Resort

## A Vast Inventory for Every Budget and Type of Meeting

For most meeting planners, perhaps the single most important factor in a decision to use Orlando as the destination for a meeting or convention is its vast and diverse hotel inventory. There is literally an option for every budget, taste and type of meeting, from the most exclusive luxury brands to inexpensive options for planners looking to net bottom-line value at the lowest possible cost.



*"I've told people it's like watching a ballet when their staff serves a group of our size."*

Karen Bossin, Director of Conferences and Events  
Shoppers Drug Mart, Toronto, ON

Although the list of hotel properties is a long one, many planners — for obvious reasons — choose one of the properties near Walt Disney World Resort or Universal Orlando Resort.

The convention center of the 655-room **Disney's Contemporary Resort** features 115,000 sf of meeting and event space that is all conveniently located within the Walt Disney World complex. The property also boasts state-of-the-art audio-video equipment. The Top of the World observation deck on the top floor of the Bay Lake Tower offers birds-eye views of the park and fireworks displays.

The 1,956-room **Disney's Coronado Springs Resort** features a convention center with 220,000 sf of meeting

space, including a pair of ballrooms, an exhibit hall and 45 breakout rooms.

The 1,338-room **Caribe Royal All-Suite Hotel and Convention Center** is Central Florida's largest all-suite convention hotel, with 150,000 sf of meeting space. Its dining options include The Venetian Room, a AAA Four Diamond award winner. The hotel is located just a mile and a half from Walt Disney World Resort.

The 814-room **Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista**, with 78,000 sf of meeting space, is within a five-minute walk



Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista



# Orlando Meeting Hotels



Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando



Orlando World Center Marriott

to the Downtown Disney complex that is now becoming the even bigger Disney Springs dining and entertainment development. It's the only hotel in the Downtown Disney resort area to provide guests access to extended theme park hours. Amenities include three pool areas, upscale shops and restaurants and lounges including Andiamo Italian Bistro & Grille, Benihana Steakhouse and Sushi and John T's lounge.

An excellent choice for more budget-minded planners is Florida's largest Embassy Suites meeting hotel — the 334-room **Embassy Suites by Hilton Orlando – Lake Buena Vista South**, a 20-minute drive from Orlando International Airport. The property features 40,000 sf of flexible meeting, prefunction and outdoor patio space, including the 15,000-sf Palms Ballroom, 5,000-sf Magnolia Ballroom and 18 flexible breakout rooms. There also are 10 boardrooms, the latest in audio-visual services, and professional convention and catering staff. The hotel is convenient to all of Orlando's world-class attractions — just 3.5 miles from Walt Disney World Resort — as well as shopping and dining establishments.

Located near Downtown Disney is the 1,014-room **Buena Vista Palace Hotel & Spa**, with more than 90,000 sf of meeting and event space, including a 23,000-sf exhibit hall.

The newest property to open as part of the sprawling Walt Disney World complex is the 443-room **Four Seasons Resort Or-**

**lando at Walt Disney World Resort**, which features 37,750 sf of meeting and event space.

The opening of the independently operated Four Seasons represents an extremely significant milestone in the evolution of Orlando, says Jane Scaletta, general manager of major destination management company AlliedPRA Orlando. "It is a phenomenal addition to the city's inventory for high-end corporate meetings," she says. "It gives us another well-known and respected luxury brand, and in particular a brand known for exceptional service. It offers both excellent indoor meeting space and outdoor event space. The property also has a sort of Mediterranean feel, so it represents something very unique and different for Orlando. There's nothing else like it in town."

Not to be outdone, Universal Orlando Resort, which includes two theme parks (Universal's Islands of Adventure and Universal Studios Florida) that feature a number of truly spectacular offsite venues, also offers multiple meeting-quality hotels.

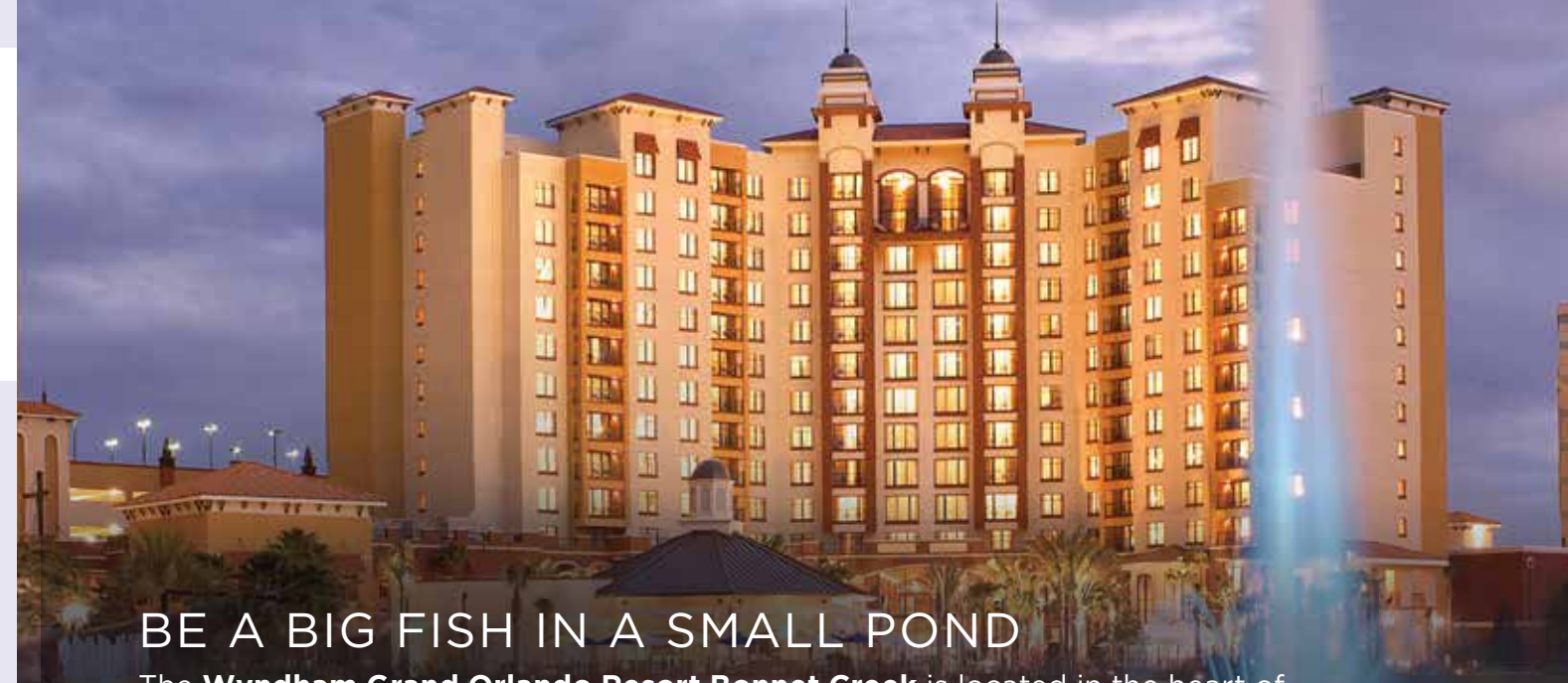
The 750-room **Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando** features more than 42,000 sf of meeting space plus a variety of outdoor venues. The property provides the opportunity for upscale, themed experiences that mimic the Italian Riviera.

The 1,800-room **Universal's Cabana Bay Beach Resort** is an iconic beach resort themed on famous beach hotels of the 1950s and '60s and offering value accommodations great for attendees who are bringing the family.

The 621-room **Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Orlando**,



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# Orlando Meeting Hotels

offers 6,000 sf unique meeting and event space, including an outdoor lawn area, plus another 140,000 sf of meeting and function space at the nearby Hard Rock Cafe and Hard Rock Live Orlando located at the phenomenal Universal CityWalk dining and entertainment complex.

SeaWorld Orlando offers a pair of popular meeting hotels at moderate price points: the 716-room **Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld**, with 185,000 sf of meeting space, and the 969-room **DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld**, with 60,000 sf of conference space.

Located just 1.5 miles from Walt Disney World Resort is one of Orlando's major meeting hotels, the 2,010-room



Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel

years in its former identity as the legendary The Peabody Orlando as one of the very best meeting hotels in town. The Hyatt's appeal is enhanced by its skywalk connection to the Orange County Convention Center. The remodeled and rebranded Hyatt Regency Orlando features 315,000 sf of meeting and event space, including five pillar-free ballrooms and 105 breakout rooms.

The Hyatt Regency is among the favorite Orlando properties of Michael Farrell, senior vice president, events and communications, at Exton, Pennsylvania-based World Travel Inc., which uses Orlando for two or three dozen meetings and incentive programs each year, ranging in size from 15 to more than 1,000 attendees. "The Hyatt Regency Orlando is a phenomenal hotel," Farrell says.

The Hyatt Regency also served as the headquarters hotel for Microsoft's worldwide team of 15,500 international attendees at the Worldwide Partner Conference earlier this year, according to Ahinsa Mansukhani, Microsoft's U.S. worldwide partner conference lead, who oversaw activities for the event's 6,000 U.S. attendees.

The headquarters hotel for Mansukhani's U.S. team was the 1,417-room **Hilton Orlando**, which is also connected to the convention center by covered walkway and features 225,000 sf of meeting and event space.

After experiencing Orlando for the first time, Mansukhani says that it delivers a unique logistical advantage. "Every major meeting destination has its kind of 'unique experience' that they create around their convention center," she says. "But Orlando is really different. It feels like you're in your own little bubble around the convention center and that it's designed specifically and perfectly for large groups. From a perspective based purely on convenience, Orlando has a very good footprint for a meeting of our size."

In a destination crowded with exemplary hotel options, the independent, 2,265-room **Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel** ranks very high on the city's list of most acclaimed and appreciated meeting properties. It is particularly well-known for its exceptional and well-run meeting facilities and what many repeat customers consider the best and most expert support services in town. The Swan and Dolphin Hotel houses more than 329,000 sf of meeting space that includes 110,500 sf of contiguous convention and exhibit space, four ballrooms, 84 meeting rooms and two executive boardrooms.



Hyatt Regency Orlando connects to the convention center.

**Orlando World Center Marriott**, which features a whopping 450,000 sf of total meeting and event space including ballrooms, conference rooms and outdoor space that offers sweeping views of the city.

Karen Bossin, director of conferences and events at Shoppers Drug Mart in North York, Toronto, used Orlando World Center Marriott for an annual meeting that drew more than 2,000 owners and managers of retail pharmacies.

Among the things that set the hotel apart from other Orlando properties is its massive amount of top-notch meeting space, Bossin says. But she also gives equally high marks to its service. "I am just amazed at the way they run groups through the property," she says. "I've told people it's like watching a ballet when their staff serves a group of our size. The way they direct and manage people, they're just very, very good at handling large groups very efficiently."

Another of Orlando's major meeting hotels is the 1,639-room **Hyatt Regency Orlando**, which reigned for

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# Orlando Meeting Hotels



Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek

Two more of Orlando's popular meeting properties are the 613-room **Wyndham Orlando Resort International Drive**, with 60,000 sf of meeting space; and, located within the Walt Disney World Resort gates, the 400-room **Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek**, which offers 32,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting and function space.

The Wyndham Orlando Resort International Drive is among Scaletta's favorite local hotels. "They did a multi-million dollar renovation that was completed at the end of 2014," she says. "And the property's new look and feel and especially the addition of their new Cooper's Hawk restaurant, which offers excellent food and a fantastic wine list, make it even more special. The Wyndham Orlan-

do Resort International Drive also has excellent meeting space and ballrooms."

Finally, Orlando has an outpost of what is arguably the most exclusive luxury hotel brand in history, New York City's legendary Waldorf Astoria flagship. The 498-room **Waldorf Astoria Orlando** features nearly 42,000 sf of meeting and function space, including a new, 8,712-sf Central Park Ballroom. Its signature restaurant is the critically acclaimed Bull & Bear.

Adjacent to the Waldorf Astoria is the 1,001-room **Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek**, with 132,000 sf of meeting and function space, including a 35,925-sf ballroom and 26 breakout rooms with state-of-the-art meeting technology.

**ORLANDO**

## New & Renovated Hotels

Universal Orlando Resort will offer a fifth hotel next year, the new, 1,000-room, Caribbean-themed **Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando**, which will feature 131,000 sf of meeting space. Signature amenities will include a lagoon and a towering waterfall offering a stunning backdrop for events. A covered bridge will connect Loews Sapphire Falls to **Loews Royal Pacific Resort at Universal Orlando**. The 1,000-room Loews Royal Pacific Resort has expanded its meeting and function space from 85,000 sf to more than 140,000 sf. Facilities include a 41,000-sf, column-free Pacifica Ballroom and a new 32,000-sf ballroom, as well as 15 breakout rooms and a 10,000 sf convention center lawn for outdoor events.

Universal Orlando Resort recently announced that it will expand **Cabana Bay Beach Resort**, Universal's largest on-site hotel, in 2017 with 400 new rooms housed in two additional towers.

The 400-room **Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek** recently commenced a meeting space expansion project set for completion in May 2016. The new spaces will include the 3,743-sf Bonnet Creek Ballroom, which will accommodate up to 360 attendees and feature a 1,000-sf balcony overlooking the oasis pool and fountains on the lake; and the 2,350-sf Expedition Room, which will accommodate 220 attendees.

The **Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel** is currently completing a \$125 million renovation, the largest makeover in its history. The project includes every guest room in the 758-room Swan Hotel and the 1,509-room Dolphin Hotel. The makeover will be completed by the end of 2017 and will not disrupt service or the availability of the majority of guest rooms and meeting rooms.

**Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista** recently completed a large remodel of public spaces and guest rooms, and a \$7 million renovation of the meeting space and function area. A new walkway bridge between the hotel and the new Disney Springs is set to be completed this fall.

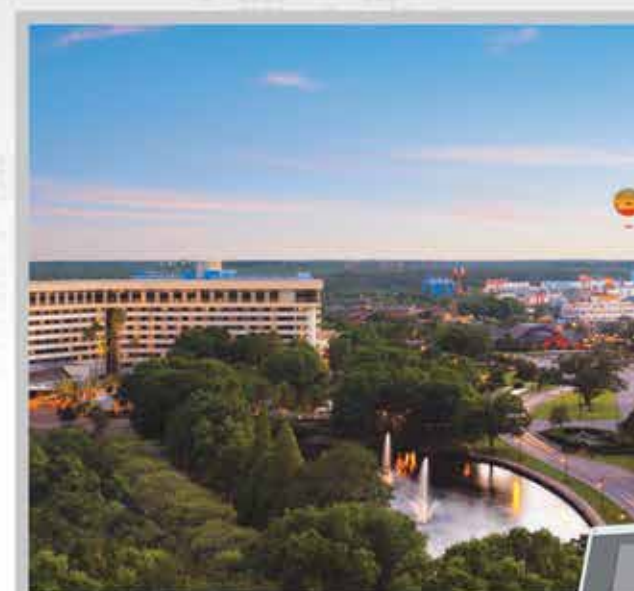


Wyndham Grand Orlando's expansion.



Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal Orlando

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Microsoft's Worldwide Partner Conference..

## The Orange County Convention Center Continues to Expand With Demand

When Visit Orlando notes that the city was quite literally “built for meetings and conventions” over the last two decades, nothing in town supports that notion more than the Orange County Convention Center, which is the second largest in the country, a 7-million-sf complex that features 2.1 million sf of exhibit space and 479,190 sf of meeting space.

Originally opened in 1983, the state-of-the-art facility has undergone a number of expansions and renovations that keep it atop the list of best convention centers in the U.S.

It is divided into a North/South Building and a West Building. The North/South Building includes 950,282 sf of exhibit space and 166,050 sf of meeting space, divided into 25 dedicated meeting rooms and 94 breakout rooms. The West Building includes 1,103,538 sf of exhibit space and 313,140 sf of dedicated meeting space, divided into 49 rooms and 138 breakout rooms.

The complex also includes a 62,182-sf Valencia Ballroom, a 2,643-seat Linda W. Chapin Theater and a 200-seat Lecture Hall, all located in the West Building.



The West Building Lecture Hall.

*“What I love about it is its overall design. ...There’s always a quick way to get from one area to another. And that was very important to us.”*

Ahinsa Mansukhani, U.S. Worldwide Partner Conference Lead  
Microsoft, Redmond, WA



### 5-Year Improvement Plan

The convention center is now in the second year of a five-year capital improvement plan, commenced in 2013, that includes the renovation of West Halls E and F and meeting rooms.

Hall F was converted into a new 48,000-sf ballroom and four executive boardrooms. Updated meeting rooms in a section of the West Building will become signature rooms, with wood flooring, bamboo ceilings and a scenic, outdoor mezzanine deck for social functions.

The West Building has been undergoing aesthetic and safety improvements since the beginning of 2013. The upgrades, when completed in 2017, will include new curtain walls, lighting and utility upgrades, restroom renovations, fire alarm systems and new furniture groupings in concourses. An updated wireless system in both buildings will handle more attendees on cell phones, tablets and portable devices at one time and provide more reliable coverage.

The fact that the convention center has been continually improved for many years is a fundamental reason why Orlando attracts an ever-increasing number of city-wide meetings and other major events, says Visit Orlando President and CEO George Aguel.

“The convention center has continued to expand as demand for it has grown,” he says. “And through the expansion of the facility, we have been able to bring in larger and larger meetings and conventions. And that, in turn, has created another level of demand, which then created even more interest in the destination in general.”



The North/South Building entrance.

Jane Scaletta, general manager of AlliedPRA Orlando, concurs that ongoing improvements of the convention center have been a key catalyst for the growth of the destination.

### Green Building

“The facility is also (LEED Gold-certified for Existing Buildings), which is very important now, because more and more companies want to have green meetings as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives,” she says. “And in the future, even more companies will be looking for that. And Orlando has it. For example, about 10–12 percent of the facility’s electrical power is generated by a one-megawatt solar photovoltaic system on the roof.”

The facility also boasts state-of-the-art technology, says Scaletta. “The Orange County Convention Center is absolutely one of the best in the country,” she says, “when it comes to technology and things like state-of-the-art broadband service.”

Based on her experience during this year’s Microsoft Worldwide Partner Conference, Ahinsa Mansukhani, U.S. worldwide partner conference lead for Microsoft, also cites the Orange County Convention Center as one of the top facilities in the country. “It is a beautiful building,” she says. “What I love about it is its overall design. And one thing I especially like is its natural light. It’s also very interesting and pleasing from an overall visual perspective. And when you move from the outside to the inside, the layout and logistics are really great. For example, certain convention centers are

long and difficult or complicated to navigate. So I love the mirror imaging of the two individual facilities so you can divide the convention center into pieces or sections. And that also makes it very easy to navigate. There’s always a quick way to get from one area to another. And that was very important to us.”

Likewise, the center’s green certification is perceived as a major benefit. “The fact that it is green-certified,” Mansukhani says, “and that they are able to make that a priority in such a sophisticated and elegant venue is an incredible feat and something that we as a company really valued.”

ORLANDO



Natural light floods a prefunction area.



# Orlando Theme Parks & Unique Venues



Popeye and Olive Oil meet Shoppers Drug Mart attendees at a Universal event.

Credit: Has Sullivan

## Going Offsite and Going Big

Looking back over the history of Orlando as a meeting destination, its steady growth over the last 25 years can be traced back to a single factor as the most important reason for its popularity: its world-famous theme parks. Walt Disney World Resort, Universal Orlando and SeaWorld long ago made Orlando one of the world's most spectacular destinations, one unlike any other.

Today, the theme parks and the one-of-a-kind venues offered to meeting planners are a major draw for meeting professionals.

"One of the key things about our theme parks when it comes to corporate meetings is that if you're a corporate meeting planner and you want to create something special, you can bring your group into a theme park, capture some part of that theme park exclusively or do a buyout of the entire facility, and then do something truly spectacular, like an IllumiNations fireworks display at Disney," says Visit Orlando President and CEO George Aguel.



Michael Farrell, SVP, Events and Communications  
World Travel Inc., Exton, PA

*"We were one of the first groups to do a buyout of (Madame Tussauds). ...The facility and the staff are phenomenal."*

### Event Experts

In addition to their obvious and inherent appeal to meeting attendees, the theme parks also offer a powerful and unique benefit for planners — production and staging capabilities that rank right up there with Hollywood.

Those capabilities go far beyond what any company or meeting planning team could ever do on its own. The result can be something spectacular, but executed as a turnkey venture that makes life easy for the planner. "That is really the biggest advantage of doing your event at one of our theme parks," Aguel says. "And it's basically going to cost you the same amount of money as it would if you did it yourself and put all of the pieces together. But you're going to get something much more spectacular and memorable at a theme park."

Each of the three major theme parks offers well-established and extremely popular event venues that can be tailored to smaller groups or provided under a buyout of the entire facility to large groups.

For example, Walt Disney World Resort makes its internationally celebrated Epcot venue available to groups. Its signature amenity is the IllumiNations fireworks show, and private VIP packages are available for relatively small groups, or the entire facility can be bought out.

For her meeting's "partner celebration night" for U.S. attendees, Ahinsa Mansukhani, U.S. worldwide partner conference lead for Microsoft, did a buyout of Epcot. "That's the night when we thank our partners and celebrate their achievements," she says. "And by doing the event at Epcot, we were able to



Epcot IllumiNations dessert party.

Credit: Walt Disney World Resort



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ORLANDO

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# Orlando Theme Parks & Unique Venues



A private group event at SeaWorld's Penguin Encounter.

provide a really fun and exciting night. It was an exceptional experience."

The evening began with an exclusive dinner at Epcot's World Showcase venue, and then progressed to a VIP presentation of the IllumiNations fireworks display. As of 10 p.m., the entire park became a private playground for Microsoft's U.S. contingent of 6,000 attendees.

"There was food and beverage and the rides were open," Mansukhani says. "In addition to being a fun and exciting venue, Epcot is the epitome of innovation when it comes to Disney and, in turn, Disney is the epitome of experience. It was a really memorable night."

For her meeting earlier this year, Karen Bossin, director of conferences and events for Shoppers Drug Mart, did a buyout of the New York set at Universal Studios Orlando. "It offers a variety of things to do, from the rides to the bars to the entertainment," she says. "It's also a street-party venue, so it was just a very special evening. And the food-and-beverage service was excellent."

## New Attractions

Like its competitors, Disney also has new attractions on the drawing board. Early next year, Epcot will debut a new ride based on the popular animated Disney film "Frozen." Dubbed "Frozen Ever After," it will be

located in the Norway Pavilion of the World Showcase. The ride will take guests through the fabled kingdom of Arendelle during its Winter in Summer Celebration, featuring the most popular characters and music from the movie.

For an entirely different kind of experience, Disney offers its long-running Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park Wild Africa Trek, a three-hour, privately guided expedition that features close encounters with exotic wildlife that includes Nile crocodiles and hippos. Currently under construction as the largest expansion in Animal Kingdom's history is Pandora - The World of Avatar, a land inspired by James Cameron's blockbuster "Avatar" movie and featuring the flight simulation thrill ride Avatar Flight of Passage.

In August, Disney announced that it will debut new Star Wars-themed attractions at its Orlando and Los Angeles parks. Covering 14 acres each, the two new "lands" will represent Disney's largest single-themed land expansions ever at the two facilities. The experience will transport guests to a never-before-seen planet, a remote trading port and a stop where Star Wars characters and their stories come to life in dramatic fashion. The experience will include being behind the controls of one of the most recognizable ships in the galaxy — the Millennium Falcon.

Like Disney and Universal, SeaWorld never rests on its laurels and is constantly developing new attractions,



Performers entertain at SeaWorld's Ports of Call venue.



Universal's Skull Island: Reign of Kong attraction will open next summer.



Volcano Bay waterpark debuts in 2017 at Universal.

such as its relatively new Antarctica: Empire of the Penguin, which features a population of penguins. The ice-and-snow-covered realm makes a stunning backdrop for group events.

Making its much-anticipated debut at SeaWorld next summer will be Mako, the tallest, fastest and longest roller coaster in Orlando. The ride will be the centerpiece of a new, themed, two-acre facility that includes Shark Encounter, Sharks Underwater Grill and educational options that feature sharks in all their terrifying glory.

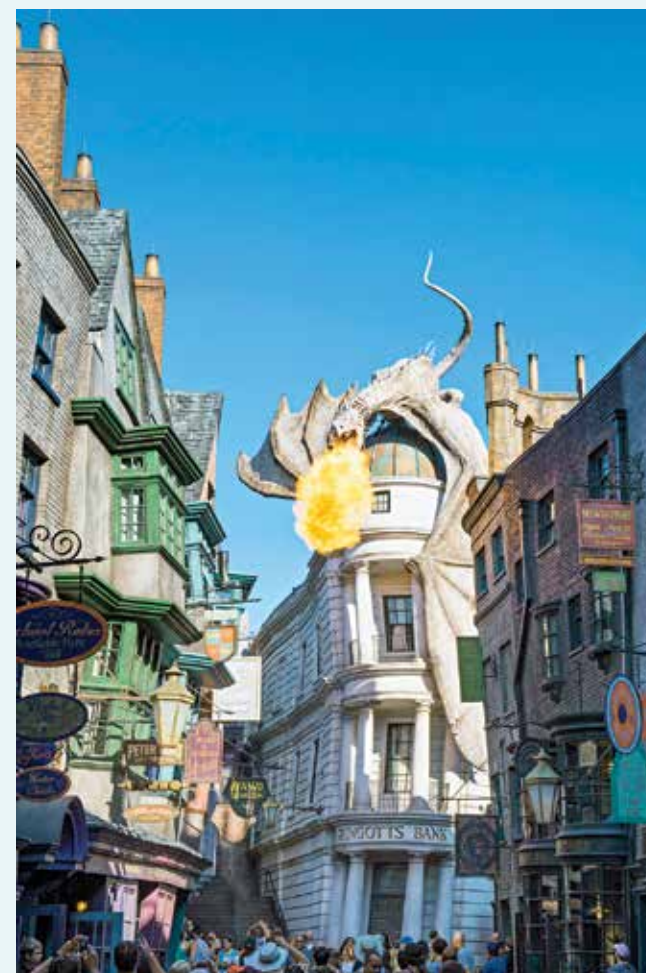
Last year, SeaWorld opened Ihu's Breakaway Falls in Aquatica, SeaWorld's Waterpark, which features the tallest and steepest free-fall waterslide in Orlando.

SeaWorld bucket-list experiences include the Beluga Interaction Program, one of the few experiences in the world that allows guests to have a hands-on interaction with beluga whales. SeaWorld also offers a Private Elite VIP tour, which provides groups with front-of-the-line access to rides, reserved seating at SeaWorld shows and the opportunity to feed dolphins, sea lions and stingrays.

For large events, groups can use the Sea Harbor Pavilions or the Ports of Call banquet facility, featuring a



NBC Sports Grill & Brew opens this fall at Universal CityWalk.



Universal's Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Diagon Alley.

12,000-sf ballroom — or planners can even buy out of the entire park.

Among the most popular experiences at Universal Orlando Resort is The Wizarding World of Harry Potter. It offers a completely immersive experience into the magical world based on the famous books and movies that have enchanted audiences all over the world. Islands of Adventure is home to the Hogwarts castle where guests can embark on Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, a thrill



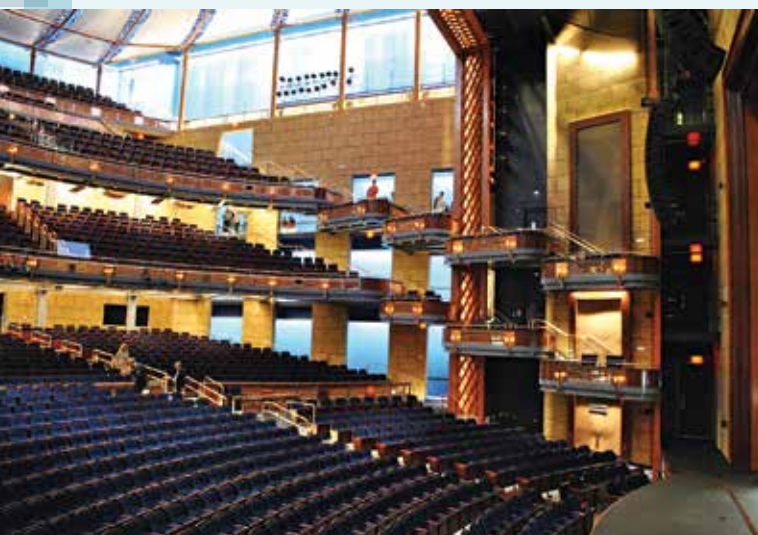
# Orlando Theme Parks & Unique Venues

ride that will make you forget you are a muggle. Right outside the castle are the magical shops of Hogsmeade where guests can stock up on wizarding supplies and catch the scenic Hogwarts Express train ride to Universal Studios' new Diagon Alley. This new land takes you off the streets of London and into more magical shops and wizardly dining establishments, and the Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts thrill ride where you can fight a dragon and escape the perils of the Gringotts vaults.

Next summer, Universal will debut a groundbreaking new attraction at its Islands of Adventure park. "Skull Island: Reign of Kong" will pay homage to the legendary King Kong, one of the most storied figures in movie history.

In 2017, Universal will open a new water park called Volcano Bay at Universal Orlando Resort. The facility will be inspired by classic postcard images of tropical island settings.

Universal Orlando Resort offers endless options for themed events, and large groups can buy out all of Islands



The new Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts.



World Travel Inc. attendees pose with their favorite wax celebrities at the newly opened Madame Tussauds.

of Adventure or Universal Studios, or stage a Universal CityWalk block party.

## Offsite Venues

For smaller groups, especially ones that want a quieter or more intimate experience than provided by the major theme parks, there also are many options.

For another offsite evening at her meeting this year, Bossin did a buy-out of the entire Hard Rock venue located at Universal's CityWalk dining and entertainment attraction. The facility includes both a Hard Rock Cafe and a Hard Rock Live music and entertainment venue.

"We wanted a restaurant/bar type of facility because the meeting this year was during the Super Bowl," Bossin says. "But in addition to our attendees being able to watch the game, we made use of the entire facility and did a number of different events, including one at Hard Rock Live."

Michael Farrell, senior vice president, events and communications for World Travel Inc., used the new Madame Tussauds Orlando, which opened in March at the new and still developing I-Drive 360 complex near the convention center, for an event at one of his meetings earlier this year. "We were one of the first groups to do a buyout of that facility and we had a wonderful cocktail and reception and dinner there," he says. "The facility and the staff are phenomenal. We had a great event." Catering was provided by the Wyndham Orlando Resort International Drive, located next to the I-Drive 360 complex.

Last November, the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts opened. Located in the heart of downtown Orlando, the center is the new home for Broadway productions and the Orlando Ballet, among other performances. The arts center includes two performance theaters, a 300-seat community theater, an outdoor plaza and a banquet room. The theaters and public space can be used for private events.

ORLANDO

# Orlando Dining & Entertainment



Flatbed buffet at the American Q in Lake Buena Vista.

## A Growing Culinary Scene Beyond the Theme Parks

Even among meeting planners who are familiar with Orlando's world-class hotel inventory and its famous theme parks, the fact that it also offers a sophisticated but also diversified dining and entertainment scene often goes unnoticed.

However, not only does Orlando offer top-notch restaurants, but a growing number of them are helmed by celebrity chefs and other established stars of the culinary world, such as Wolfgang Puck and Todd English.

And like its hotel product, theme parks, offsite venues and other attractions, the city's restaurants are well organized into distinct districts that make logistical planning and transportation easy to handle.

### Restaurant Row

Although there are excellent restaurants located throughout Orlando, the best known and most popular eateries are conveniently located along International Drive and "Restaurant Row," which stretches along Sand Lake Road in the center of the city and is the centralized location of more than 20 of Orlando's most acclaimed and popular restaurants.

"What we really like about the dining scene in Orlando is the variety of good restaurants offered along International Drive," says Michael Farrell, senior vice president, events and communications for World Travel Inc. "If you go out on a budget, there are good options for that. If you want to go to a five-star restaurant, there are options for that. If you want a good steak house or a great seafood restaurant, you can find those. And then there is everything in between, at a whole range of price points. So that range of options and range of budget options really makes Orlando a solid dining destination."

Jane Scaletta, general manager of AlliedPRA Orlando, also finds that Orlando's dining options play an ever-increasing role in the selection of the destination for meetings and conventions. "We offer something along Restaurant Row every time we respond to an RFP and present a proposal," she says. "It's one of the things that really makes Orlando unique as a destination. It also is one of the things that makes Orlando

*"There are so many great dining options in such a short distance. It's perfect for dine-around programs."*



Jane Scaletta, General Manager  
AlliedPRA Orlando

so convenient for planners and attendees, because there are so many great dining options in such a short distance. It's perfect for dine-around programs because it's easy to get to and it also makes transportation to and from the restaurants very efficient."

Scaletta's favorite restaurants include Eddie V's Prime Seafood, a fine-dining, steak-and-seafood restaurant with a superb wine list. "It also has a great vibe," Scaletta says. "It's a very sophisticated and charismatic ambience."

Another of her favorites is the relatively new Rocco's



Tommy Bahama Restaurant & Bar at Pointe Orlando.



# Orlando Dining & Entertainment



Mango's Tropical Cafe Orlando opens this fall.

Tacos and Tequila Bar, which serves upscale, sophisticated Mexican cuisine. "They also have a tequila bar that specializes in fine tequilas and one of their specialties is that they make fresh guacamole at your table," Scaletta says. "It's a very unique place that is also a lot of fun."

She also favors Vines Grille & Wine Bar. "It's really suited to small, more intimate groups of up to about 20 people in a private room," Scaletta says.

"They offer prime beef like Australian Wagyu, freshly caught seafood, and an excellent wine list."

Known as "the grand dame of Orlando dining," Victoria & Albert's at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa is named after the famous British queen and her husband, and ranks as just one of two AAA Five Diamond restaurants in all of Florida. It offers a seven-course, prix-fixe menu that is created fresh nightly. The excep-

tional fare is complemented by Frette linens, Riedel crystal and Christofle silverware. The acclaimed wine list features nearly 400 choices from more than 18 countries.

Farrell staged an event at Tommy Bahama Restaurant & Bar, located in Pointe Orlando, a dining and entertainment complex located just up the street from the convention center on International Drive. "That was a fantastic venue and a great experience," Farrell says. "The food and the service were both outstanding."

The Pointe Orlando complex includes a number of restaurants popular with both locals and visitors. Among them are BB King's Blues Club, Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar, Maggiano's Little Italy, Greek food emporium Taverna Opa and The Oceanaire Seafood Room. The complex also includes an Improv Comedy Club & Fat Fish Blue entertainment venue/restaurant. Earlier this year, one of Orlando's most popular restaurant/bars, the stylish and sophisticated Blue Martini, relocated to a new outpost in the Pointe from its former location at Mall of Millennia.

Recently opened new restaurants at Pointe Orlando include RA Sushi and Minus 5° Ice Bar.

## New & Upcoming

While it has a long list of well-established restaurants popular with groups, there also is a never-ending progression of new restaurant openings in Orlando.

Among the most talked about new restaurants recently opened are Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House on International Drive; and Highball & Harvest, the new flagship restaurant and culinary tribute to classic Southern cuisine at The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, which is also home to Norman's, captained by chef Norman Van Aken, "the founding father of New World Cuisine."

Mango's Tropical Cafe, the new Orlando outpost of the long-standing hot spot on South Beach in Miami, is set to open this fall. Private party rooms will accommodate up to 800 guests, and planners can add a little spice by scheduling salsa lessons and performances.

One of the most anticipated eateries coming soon to the



Antojitos Authentic Mexican Food at Universal CityWalk.

new Disney Springs are Morimoto Asia, from Food Network "Iron Chef" Masaharu Morimoto, and STK Orlando, an upscale steak house.

Among the city's many major entertainment options, the reigning champions are Blue Man Group at Universal Orlando Resort and La Nouba by Cirque du Soleil at Downtown Disney.

# Orlando Golf & Spa



A Mandara Spa massage at Loews Portofino Bay Hotel.

## Must-Haves on the Meeting Agenda

The last elements on the menu of amenities that make Orlando a spectacular meeting destination are its golf courses and spas. Both play a significant role in many of the meetings and incentive programs that bring attendees to town.

Given that level of demand, it's not surprising that Orlando now offers more than 175 golf courses and 20 destination spas.

"In today's market, at least 70 percent of our meeting groups use golf or spa facilities, or both," says Jane Scaletta, general manager of AlliedPRA Orlando. Her preferred golf course is Grand Cypress Golf Club, located at The Villas of Grand Cypress. "The thing that makes it unique is that you have four different nine-hole courses, so there are multiple options for putting together a round of 18 holes. And Grand Cypress is especially famous for its course that is a replica of the Old Course at St. Andrews in Scotland."

The 146-unit The Villas of Grand Cypress offers 10,480 sf of meeting space and bills itself as the city's premier golf resort. To maintain its singular standard of quality, the property invested more than \$100,000 in each of its villas during its most recent renovation.

Another luxury resort property that is extremely popular with corporate meeting planners is the Grande Lakes Orlando resort, which encompasses 500 acres of tropical gardens, lakes and pristine wetlands — the headwaters of the Everglades — and features a 582-room Ritz-Carlton, with 47,000 sf of meeting space, and a 1,000-room JW Marriott, which offers 100,000 sf of space. The Ritz features an 18-hole Greg Norman Signature golf course and The Ritz-Carlton Spa with 40 treatment rooms, 4,000-sf lap pool and 6,000-sf fitness center.

Michael Farrell, senior vice president, events and communications for World Travel Inc., agrees that golf and spas are often part of Orlando meetings and incentive programs. "Those two things are almost always a factor in our meetings and incentive programs," he says. And that is particularly true when attendees bring their families. In Orlando, the golf courses and spas are key components of the destination, especially for spouses who want to go to the spa. And for golfers, there are also excellent options in terms of courses. The last time I was there, I played at the

ChampionsGate Golf Club, and it is just fantastic. It's very challenging, but it's also phenomenal."

ChampionsGate Golf Club, onsite at Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate, features two 18-hole championship courses designed by Greg Norman and is home to the David Leadbetter Golf Academy World Headquarters. The 720-room hotel also is home to the Mokara Spa and 128,000 sf of meeting space.

Farrell also likes the course at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center. "It's one of the best in Orlando," he says.

The Wyndham Grand Resort Bonnet Creek boasts an 18-hole championship golf course and Blue Harmony spa.

The Waldorf Astoria Orlando features the Waldorf Astoria Golf Club's 18-hole Rees Jones-designed golf course, which winds through the Bonnet Creek nature preserve, and a world-class Waldorf Astoria spa.

The 280-unit Reunion Resort, a Salamander Golf & Spa



The Tom Watson Signature course at Reunion Resort.

Resort, is the only resort property in the world that features three signature golf courses designed by links legends Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Tom Watson. It also boasts the only resort in the U.S. with an ANNIKA (Sorenstam) Academy golf training facility. Reunion features a full-service boutique spa, 25,000 sf of meeting space and multi-bedroom villas.

Other contenders for "best course in town," according to *Golf* magazine, include Arnold Palmer's Bay Hill Club & Lodge, Shingle Creek Golf Club, and the Tom Fazio-designed Osprey Ridge course at Walt Disney World Resort.





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