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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

A man in a dark suit and red tie is seated in an airplane cabin, looking out the window. He is holding a book and a pair of glasses. The cabin interior is visible, including the window and overhead storage bins.

## Air Travel TODAY

A Long Way  
From Yesterday

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Credit: The Mountain Winery

Attendees experience "Chef for a Day" at The Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California — a fun-filled activity venue. **PAGE 16**



Credit: Willows Lodge

Bobby Moore, the award-winning executive chef at Willows Lodge near Seattle, entertains as he instructs. **PAGE 26**



Credit: Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa

From the glorious pool to the sparkling Atlantic Ocean, Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa is an ideal meeting venue. **PAGE 30**



# Publisher's Message

## Welcome 2016

In this first issue of the new year — our 34th year of publishing *Corporate & Incentive Travel* magazine — we examine the latest meeting industry trends relating to the airline industry, budgets, incentive travel, and the ever-popular food and beverage category.

In our cover story, “The State of the Airline Industry” on page 22, you will find enlightening information as well as a timely sidebar outlining the specific group programs offered by five U.S. airlines. As you know, our industry has a good friend in the U.S. Travel Association. Lead by president and CEO Roger Dow, U.S. Travel in June presented its plan to Congress to repair the country’s air-travel infrastructure and promote a healthy passenger aviation system. U.S. Travel wants to move the nation toward a set of national policies that is pro-competition, pro-growth and pro-traveler, and as Dow stated, gives “this country the air transportation system that it needs and deserves.”

Budgeting is always a planner’s nemesis, especially in a seller’s market, and on page 12, we present a feature on number-crunching for savvy meeting planners that also includes excellent pointers on negotiating food and beverage programs. As Julie Lindsey, director of global events for San Francisco-based Gap Inc., shares: “One thing I have started doing is making the one-hour cocktail reception before dinner on-consumption and then at the dinner go into a package.”

In the “What’s Cookin’ for 2016” feature on page 26, we are reminded that the very nature of trends means that they are guaranteed to change over time, and as Emily Boykin, CMP, meeting planner for Onyx Meetings and Events in Overland Park, Kansas, notes, “Thanks to sources like Pinterest, clients are really pushing the boundaries on food and making chefs break away from their standard menus and embrace the opportunity to show off. ...You want each guest to have an authentic, memorable hospitality experience, and food and beverage is a great way to make that happen.”

What trend will we be talking about next? Boykin is wondering, too: “We survived the recent cupcake trend, are wading through the farm-to-table trend and are really ready to see what clients come up with next.”

Harvey Grotsky  
Publisher

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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
**Harvey Grotsky**

harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR  
**Mitch D. Miller**  
mitch.miller@themeetingmagazines.com

MANAGING EDITORS  
**Susan W. Fell**  
susan.fell@themeetingmagazines.com

**Susan S. Gregg**  
sue.gregg@themeetingmagazines.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS  
**Ron Bernthal**  
**Karen Brost**  
**John Buchanan**  
**Sara Churchville**  
**Maura Keller**  
**Christine Loomis**  
**Derek Reveron**  
**Mark Rowh**  
**Patrick Simms**

PRESIDENT & CEO  
**Harvey Grotsky**

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS  
**David A. Middlebrook**  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES  
2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120  
Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394  
561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509  
advertising@themeetingmagazines.com

CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME  
NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VA, VT, WV  
**Fox Associates**  
800-440-0231 • fox@themeetingmagazines.com

FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN/BAHAMAS  
**David Middlebrook**  
561-989-0600, ext. 109 • Fax: 561-989-9509  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

AL, GA, MS, NC, SC, TN  
**Fox Associates**  
800-440-0231 • fox@themeetingmagazines.com

IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MI, MN, MO  
ND, NE, OH, SD, WI  
**Fox Associates**  
800-440-0231 • fox@themeetingmagazines.com

AR, CO, LA, OK, TX  
**Fox Associates**  
800-440-0231 • fox@themeetingmagazines.com

AZ, CA, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY  
**Marshall Rubin**  
818-888-2407 • Fax: 818-888-4907  
marshall.rubin@themeetingmagazines.com

ALASKA/CANADA/MEXICO/INTERNATIONAL  
**David Middlebrook**  
561-989-0600, ext. 114 • Fax: 561-989-9509  
david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

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## News & Notes

### George Aguel to Receive Lifetime Achievement Award in Hospitality Marketing

MCLEAN, VA — The Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) will recognize George Aguel, president and CEO of Visit Orlando, with its 2015 Albert E. Koehl Award for Lifetime Achievement in Hospitality Marketing. Aguel will be honored at the HSMAI Adrian Awards Dinner Reception and Gala on February 16 at the New York Marriott Marquis.

The award, named in honor of Albert E. Koehl — a pioneer in hotel advertising, recognizes individuals who have contributed to the betterment of the industry in a significant and lasting way. “George is a key player in the hospitality and travel community and is making innovative strides while representing the most visited destination in the country,” said Robert A. Gilbert, CHME, CHBA, president and CEO of HSMAI. “We couldn’t be more excited to present George with this year’s Albert E. Koehl Award.” [www.adrianawards.com](http://www.adrianawards.com)



AGUEL

### Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center Project Moves Forward

BETHESDA, MD — Marriott International Inc., together with the owner and development partnership led by RIDA Development Corp. and Ares Management L.P., announced December 21 the closing of a \$500 million construction loan from Wells Fargo Bank as lead agent for construction of the 1,500-room Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center in Aurora, Colorado. The hotel is scheduled to be completed in late 2018.

Marriott will manage the hotel and convention center under a long-term contract. The economic impact of the project is estimated at more than \$7 billion of economic activity for the state of Colorado, with more than 80 percent of guests expected to be net new visitors to the state.

Michael Kofsky will serve as the director of sales and marketing for the Aurora, Colorado, hotel and will lead a team with the goal of prebooking more than 1.25 million room nights prior to opening. The hotel is expected to bring more than 2 million visitors to the city of Aurora and the state of Colorado during the first several years after opening. [www.gaylordhotels.com](http://www.gaylordhotels.com)



GRAHAM

### New Leadership Begins at Philadelphia CVB

PHILADELPHIA, PA — Julie Coker Graham on January 1, 2016, became the new president and CEO of the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau (PHLCVB). She assumed the role following the retirement of former President and CEO Jack Ferguson on December 31.

“It is a great honor to be assuming the position of PHLCVB President & CEO. On the heels of a visit by Pope Francis in September that drew nearly 1 million national and international visitors, Philadelphia’s star continues to rise across the globe. It is an extremely exciting time to be taking the reins,” Coker Graham said. “As we look ahead to a year that includes the City of Philadelphia hosting the 2016 Democratic National Convention and tens of thousands of delegates and leaders from around the world, I look forward to sharing Philadelphia’s story.” [www.discoverphl.com](http://www.discoverphl.com)

### Las Vegas Breaks Tourism Record

LAS VEGAS, NV — Las Vegas continued its historic visitation growth, setting another new record by surpassing 42 million visitors for the first time. This breaks last year’s record of 41.1 million, which was the first time the destination had ever topped 40 million.

“Las Vegas couldn’t have reached this achievement without the support of our resort partners and the dedicated workers who make the Las Vegas experience what it is,” said Rossi Ralenkotter, president/CEO of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA). “Whether a first-time visitor or a returning Las Vegas enthusiast, the destination continues to astonish travelers from all over the world with luxury resort experiences, world-class dining and exciting entertainment.”

Boosted by several new non-stop flights, increased convention attendance throughout the year and several other factors, Las Vegas will surpass 42 million visitors by the end of the year. The previous record was set in 2014 with 41.1 million visitors. Official visitation numbers will be announced in early 2016. [www.vegasmeansbusiness.com](http://www.vegasmeansbusiness.com)



RALENKOTTER

## Snapshots



1



2



3



4



5



6



7

Credit: Jacob Slaton Photography

1-7 Nearly 4,000 professional meeting planner and supplier members of the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) met in the coastal seaport of Vancouver for the annual Convening Leaders conference, January 10-13 at the Vancouver Convention Centre. “The creative construct for Convening Leaders 2016 is Cultivating Creative Moments, which couldn’t be more appropriate for Vancouver,” said 2 Deborah Sexton, president and CEO of PCMA. “This diverse city is a hub for endless inspiration, and the Vancouver team has consistently demonstrated they are among the world’s best with respect to delivering creativity and professionalism to the meetings industry.” Sexton is flanked by Kevin Olsen (1) and Eric Rosenberg of One Smooth Stone. 6,7 Almost 150 attendees cleaned, painted, decorated and built playscapes for daycare centers as part of the Hospitality Helping Hands program — just one project of PCMA’s Network for the Needy.



By Bonnie Boisner

## 2016 Incentive Travel Trends

**W**hen executed well, incentive travel programs can reap a multitude of benefits for your business. They improve business results by increasing sales and spurring innovation from your employees or partners. They offer a wonderful opportunity for your business to recognize top achievers within the company and facilitate a culture where employees or partners can thrive. Incentive travel programs also create and strengthen relationships among all parties involved — your company, the participants, and even the host destination or country.

Your incentive travel program should give participants an

rewarded, so personalizing their experience is key. For example, we know many millennials want to give back to the community, and they desire an opportunity to participate in corporate social responsibility initiatives as part of their incentive travel program. A large health care provider displayed this by facilitating a CSR activity through the local United Way where achievers constructed wheelchairs for a local school. Gen Xers are more independent and appreciate “on your own time” incorporated into program itineraries. Regardless of your segmentation strategy, the goal of any incentive program is to know your achievers

“Understanding the **unique desires** of participants is essential to making a memorable incentive travel experience.”

experience they wouldn’t be able to secure on their own. The program must be engaging and exciting for participants. If it isn’t, you’ll risk a lackluster response that, in the end, won’t achieve your business goals. Creating a successful incentive travel program involves proper planning, strategic communication and a well thought out rewards mix that inspires your participants to take action.

In the last year, several incentive travel trends emerged that will continue to take center stage in 2016. To keep your programs cutting-edge and attractive to all achievers, keep these trends in mind:

### PERSONALIZATION

Personalization in events has been popular for many years, and it will continue to be a major theme in 2016. Understanding the unique desires of participants is essential to making a memorable incentive travel experience.

Because of the multiple generations in the workplace today, incentive travel programs are becoming more multifaceted than ever before. Planning activities based on generational knowledge can be an effective way to design a program agenda. Each generation has varying ways in which they are motivated and want to be

and create an experience that will help you accomplish the goals for your program.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has forever changed the way we communicate with our families, our friends and our customers. It’s the way we share news, events, photos and anything else that inspires us. That’s why social media elements will remain a critical component of incentive travel programs.

Social media is an effective means of communication to continuously support, engage and inspire your participants along the way. Effectively incorporating the use of social media during your incentive travel program is also a great way to generate excitement among participants and future participants. When your incentive travel participants are having fun, they will want to share their experiences with everyone. Creating shareable moments, social walls, unique hashtags and photo-sharing opportunities will continue to be at the forefront of successful incentive travel programs.

### LONGER BOOKING AND LEAD TIMES

As the demand for meetings and incentive travel continues

to increase, supply becomes more challenging. Because of this, longer booking lead times have become a reality. We recently surveyed a number of our key suppliers in the event industry and uncovered some interesting statistics. They suggest booking your large incentive travel program two to three years in advance and medium-sized incentive travel program at least one to two years in advance. These numbers are staggering and put into perspective just how crucial the planning process is to having a successful incentive travel program.

### MOBILE

For most of us, our smartphones are with us at all times. They wake us up in the morning, they tell us the time, and they keep us connected to our work and family. We can’t function without our phones. That’s why incorporating mobile into your incentive travel programs is a trend that will continue to grow.

Mobile apps are no longer a “nice-to-have.” They are now expected at events, from incentive programs to larger user conferences. Creating a mobile app for your incentive travel program has a variety of benefits. It keeps participants engaged by identifying and recognizing top performers. The app educates participants by pushing event details and scheduling changes. They also strengthen your relationship with participants by starting the conversation early and keeping it going long after the event has ended.

Aimia was one of the first event companies to deploy a mobile app for a client many years ago and since then, we’ve seen the adoption rate skyrocket year over year. On average, 86 percent of participants at Aimia’s clients’ events are downloading the mobile app and using it frequently.

### DRONES

Drones have been soaring into the event industry and will continue to be popular in 2016. Drones can be used successfully

in a variety of ways. Drones are a great way to provide real-time videos and pictures at your event that can be shared by participants via social media. They have the ability to capture incredible footage unattainable by a traditional event photographer. Be sure to ask for certification and insurance coverage of your FAA Exemption 333 drone supplier.

### FLEXIBILITY

The more diverse the attendees are, the more you need to be diverse in your program agendas. In order to keep participants engaged, you must deliver to the right demographics and offer multiple components to meet the needs of your unique participants. For example, rather than having one activity at any given time, we provide choice in our programs. Not everyone is going to want to go zip lining or play golf or go to a sushi-making class. We offer flexibility from activities, to gifting and even F&B options.

### VIRTUAL REALITY

In 2016, we’ll see more opportunities for virtual reality to take center stage. This technology advancement can help both the meeting planner and the participant.

In-person site inspections may become fewer as hoteliers and DMCs are able to use 360-degree video to show details of the meeting space. You also can escalate your event by creating a custom virtual reality experience for participants. Imagine the excitement around launching realistic games for participants and using your own branded content within.

Incentive travel programs are an excellent way to motivate those in your business, but they must be carefully thought out and executed well. If your incentive travel program doesn’t leverage the latest trends, you risk your participants losing interest and becoming less inspired to help you achieve your business goals. Keep these suggestions in mind to continue building loyalty for your business.

C&IT



### Bonnie Boisner

is Vice President, Event Management at Aimia Inc., a data-driven marketing, event and loyalty analytics company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has more than 30 years of experience ensuring the design, planning and execution of client events that engage, inspire and educate attendees. Bonnie can be reached at [bonnie.boisner@aimia.com](mailto:bonnie.boisner@aimia.com). For more information, visit <http://www.aimia.com/en/capabilities/channels/events-management.html>.



By Michael Massari

## Trends Come and Go, But What Defines Meetings Will Never Change

Every New Year marks the beginning of certain traditions that are as familiar as fireworks or the ball dropping in Times Square. Naturally, we grow and gain new knowledge over the course of the year, and we use this to guide us through the next 365 days. This new awareness often results in a compilation of trends to look out for, setting the scene for the future. Trends are important. Trends help us through the decision-making processes when planning a meeting, whether it's choosing a menu, using new technology or selecting the perfect location. They show us what engages and interests people, allowing us to keep our meetings successful. The new options and ideas that are prevailing at meetings today, have led us to the idea that all of these trends have completely transformed meetings and the attendee experience.

Some would say that meetings are always changing; I believe that if we look a little closer, we might find that meetings haven't really changed at all. The core of a meeting doesn't

This is helpful information as these trends provide us with expectations of what attendees are hoping to experience at their next meeting or conference, in addition to any potential hurdles that can surface during the planning stages. Knowing where the industry is headed is important to keep experiences relevant and to create memorable moments. However, these trends don't define what a meeting is and why they are important to an organization. If you take away the enhanced and interactive technology, the upscale food and beverage and the lavish décor, you still have a meeting.

**TREND** [trend] noun

1. the general course or prevailing tendency; drift. 2. style or vogue.

Historically, it's easy to see that trends will come and go but the essence of what a meeting is will remain unchanged. People coming together to meet is the oldest and most natural way to

“A meeting is defined from the value that comes from the **face-to-face** connections that are being made.”

change; they are all going to have a general session, breakouts and engaging content. This is what defines a meeting — it's the content and the connections that define why we are all here, doing what we do in this industry.

**CHANGE** [cheynj] verb

1. to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is or from what it would be if left alone.

Glancing through our industry's news, everyone is talking about the current trends for 2016. All backed by research and observation, this year's headlines say that hotel demand and room rates are increasing, food and beverage features more interesting and healthier choices, safety is a major concern, and experiential options during meetings are a must have.

communicate. Something as seemingly unrelated and simple as grabbing a cup of coffee with an old friend demonstrates the positive effects that are generated at meetings. This face-to-face interaction reinforces the relationship between people. It's being able to make that connection with someone that is completely irreplaceable in creating a better understanding and relationship. That connection and understanding cannot be replaced by email or virtual gatherings.

The setting doesn't need to be extravagant: If we took away all the peripheral aspects of a meeting, we could see that a meeting is still just that — and it would look the same across the board from small to large groups. When we think of the fundamentals of a meeting, it's a group of people coming together to enhance and further their ideas by sharing them with one another. There is value there, and it is still a worthwhile

venture for businesses and those participating. Right now, with business booming, it's easy for us to focus on the trends and the new and exciting options available to us. It's easy to forget that not too long ago, we didn't have this luxury.

**FUNDAMENTAL** [fuhn-duh-men-tl] adjective

1. serving as, or being an essential part of, a foundation or basis; basic; underlying. 2. of relating to, or affecting the foundation or basis.

noun: 1. a basic principle, rule, law, or the like, that serves as the groundwork of a system; essential part.

During the economic downturn that began in 2008, businesses were forced to substantially limit their budgets, and some organizations canceled their meetings completely. Budgets were reduced, and with this, the options for entertainment, food and beverage and other inclusions were limited. However, meetings were still successful. Businesses that continued to hold and attend meetings experienced continued growth and proved to be more profitable through the recession. This led everyone to reevaluate why they held meetings, as they clearly affected their success. When it came down to it, companies realized the value of face-to-face interactions were undeniable. Every dollar spent on business travel converted into \$10 in new revenue, and that was only one of many benefits. Spending the time and effort to make a personal connection and communicate effectively through a live interaction sets a high precedent for productive and successful businesses. At the end of the day, holding meetings with engaging content and purposeful conversation is what drove our industry forward.

I encourage you to take a look at what the emerging trends are for 2016 in the meetings industry. It's important to remember that a meeting is defined from the value that comes from the face-to-face connections that are being made; the

technology, food, décor and activities act to enhance the meeting, not define it. When it comes down to it, meetings have remained true to their fundamentals. The look and the experiences have changed and progressed on the surface but at the core of it all, the foundation of what a meeting is has and always will stay the same.

C&IT

### Michael Massari

is Senior Vice President, Caesars Entertainment Corporation, Las Vegas, Nevada. He oversees the meetings, conventions and events business for Caesars Entertainment's portfolio of nearly 40 U.S. properties. He also is an Executive Committee member of the board of the U.S. Travel Association, sits on the MPI Foundation's Global Board of Trustees and also serves on the College of Southern Nevada Board of Trustees.



Michael Massari



# Budgeting for 2016

## Savvy Planners Share Ways to Prioritize Needs and Maximize Value While Negotiating Concessions

Among the signs of the overall health of corporate meeting budgets is the response to Meeting Professional International's Meetings Outlook Winter Edition survey: 11 percent of respondents anticipate budgets to increase by 6 percent or more in the near future, while 42 percent expect an increase between 1 percent and 5 percent.

Of course, cost savings and avoidance strategies must still complement a larger budget in order to maximize value, as well as offset higher lodging rates. A vibrant travel industry continues to drive up demand and RevPAR, which translates to room rate increases. "The market dynamic has changed because there has not been (significant) new supply in the convention hotel sector and the economy is clearly improving, which increases the demand for meetings," notes Julie Lindsey, director, global events, Gap Inc. in San Francisco.

Lindsey and her planning team book primarily in first-tier cities where the seller's market is strongest. A robust airlift is typically high priority for their events, which rules out many lower-tier cities with more affordable lodging costs. Fortunately, meeting in second- and third-tier cities is but one possible avenue to cost control. If meeting in a first-tier city is a "must have," then a planner can consider which "could haves" the meeting owners may be willing to forego.

"Prioritize what the needs are," advises Kathy L. Miller, president of Schaumburg, Illinois-based Total Event Resources. "We'll often ask a client, 'What



are your must haves, what are your should haves and what are your could haves?" That's the first step to developing creative solutions that deliver value on the spend.

For example, if the specific dates desired are a "could have," there is the opportunity for date flexibility and perhaps meeting hoteliers' need times, thereby increasing negotiating leverage. "One of the best things the buyer can do is be flexible with their dates because a lot of the hotels are filling holes: 2016, '17 and '18 are booked with holes," Miller notes. If a downtown hotel is just a "could have," a suburban or airport property may offer some rate relief or other kinds of savings. Dale Fisher, CMP, senior project manager with Takeda Pharmaceutical Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recently booked a short meeting for a global group at the Hilton London Heathrow Airport for logistical convenience, and "a nice side benefit is that I'm not paying for ground transportation," she adds. If an offsite special event is merely a "could have," perhaps it can be held at the hotel, increasing the F&B revenue the planner brings to the table during negotiation.

### Bargaining Chips

Leverage is equally important to negotiating concessions, which can be more challenging in the current market conditions. And since hoteliers are more selective about the group business they take, they often want to assess the full piece of business — including all requested concessions — at the RFP stage. "Hoteliers are taking the request package into consideration more holistically than they perhaps did in the past," Lindsey observes. "I'm being asked more frequently in the early phases of an RFP for concession requests. So the hotels want to look at what the rate is and what else the planner is going to be asking them down the line." Apart from greater selectivity on the hotel side, this trend also is motivated by "pressure on hotels to show revenue growth," Lindsey says. "It's a little difficult (to detail all the desired concessions) with the electronic RFP process, but we've been trying to accommodate by following up quickly



**Kim Hentges, CMP**  
Senior Planner  
Events and Incentives  
Lennox Industries Inc.  
Richardson, TX

*"There seems to be a trend in room service charges where the gratuity is already included and shown on the receipt, but then there is another line item called 'additional gratuity' for the guest to fill in."*

with our concessions requests for each meeting so they can actually quote on the total package."

If a concession on an ancillary fee is not addressed at the RFP stage, then it should be discussed at the contract stage, she recommends. "Get any ancillaries into the contract because you have the most leverage before you sign," Lindsey says. "So anything you can think of that you might be paying for should be negotiated in the contract upfront." That can include quite a few line items: For her larger meetings, "it's not unusual for my contract to have two pages' worth of agreed-upon concessions and operational considerations."

With regard to F&B, for example, numerous items can be included in the contract, such as waiving replating fees, waiving bartender or carving fees, and discounts or modified menus for crew and staff meals. More general F&B pricing constraints also can be included. Due to the regulations on transfer of value to health care providers at meetings,

"we put it in our contracts that breakfast, lunch and dinner need to be below a certain rate," Fisher notes.

Kim Hentges, CMP, senior planner, events and incentives, Lennox Industries Inc. in Richardson, Texas, adds, "Most hotels and resorts provide a standard 3–5 percent 'prepare and overset allowance' for each F&B function," and suggests planners "incorporate this into your hotel contract and your guarantees."

### Food & Beverage

F&B is a traditional target of cost control, given that it "can be up to 40 percent of your meeting budget" depending on the nature of the event, says Lindsey. "It's not only a place where you can be more strategic, but it's also an enormous area of spend." Among the myriad cost-saving considerations in this area are the following.

- **Onsite vs. offsite F&B.** As mentioned, the promise of keeping more F&B functions onsite can accrue some negotiating leverage, but there is still "a lot of evaluation to be done," says Lindsey. "The hotel F&B can be very expensive because of the union and labor requirements around it. So I think you can often get less expensive catering at an offsite venue, but then you're paying for transportation and you have to keep an eye on your F&B minimum at the hotel."
- **Group dynamics as a basis for decisions on pricing structure.** What is the expected "attendee flow" at a reception? Will they come all at once, or come and go in a more casual scenario? This knowledge of attendee behavior can inform the choice between paying on-consumption or buying an F&B package. "If they tend to come all at once a package would be the better option; if it's a casual reception then on-consumption may be better because they might come just for 30 minutes, grab one drink and leave," Lindsey says. "One thing I've started doing is making the one-hour cocktail reception before dinner on-consumption and then at the dinner go into a package." Similarly, Hentges recommends "knowing your

audience” when paying for alcoholic drinks: “Paying ‘by consumption’ can be more cost effective compared to ‘by the hour,’” she says. Also, items that are provided à la carte are not necessarily charged on-consumption, so this must be confirmed. “There are hotels whose food-break options are sold per item, but are not on-consumption, so if you order 100 and not all 100 are taken they are still yours,” Hentges advises. “Provide the extras you paid for to production staff, at another event that day or take them back to the office.” Overall, keeping records on which pricing structures best fit a group’s behavior will guide decisions on future F&B functions, as will information on the actual number of attendees fed for each event compared to what was guaranteed. “The banquet captain can provide this information and it is great to have for the next program, so you do not over-guarantee,” Hentges adds.

- **Custom-designed menus.** A tried-and-true approach for savings is to provide the F&B budget to the convention services manager and ask for a menu to be designed that fits that budget. “Nine times out of 10 we won’t pick off of the standardized menu,” says Miller. “Instead, we say to the hotel that we want to spend, say, \$30 (per head) on a lunch or we have this coffee break budget, and ask them to design something accordingly. That’s a great way of being able to save.” What is more, “chefs enjoy having the opportunity to create outside of the standard banquet menus,” Hentges observes. Cost-saving customization can be requested even for non-meal items. “For jumbo cookies, ask the hotel to make smaller-size cookies using the same amount of total dough,” Hentges suggests.
- **Sustainable, healthful and less expensive.** Proteins generally cost more than vegetables, starches and grains, so when possible, offer the latter, which also are more often the more healthful choices. In addition,



**Julie Lindsey**  
Director, Global Events  
Gap Inc.  
San Francisco, CA

*“One thing I’ve started doing is making the one-hour cocktail reception before dinner on-consumption and then at the dinner go into a package.”*

using “proteins (results in) a higher carbon footprint,” says Lindsey, so by using fewer proteins “you can actually create a more sustainable menu and decrease your costs.”

- **Hotel beverage services.** “Have a clear understanding of the type(s) of complimentary water service that is offered,” Hentges advises. “We have partnered with a hotel that offered small bottled water as their complimentary water service, so there was no need to pay for bottled water during meals, meetings or breaks. Sometimes hotels offer a few complimentary water coolers.” And when it comes to the group’s caffeine needs, “half gallons of coffee are not advertised, but can be offered if you ask and are typically at a lower cost than a gallon of coffee,” she adds.

### Décor and Offsite Venues

When décor for a special event is called for, and the budget is tight, consider that “sometimes less is more,” as Miller puts it, especially when the venue itself is the star. “We just did an event at Union Station here in Chicago and spent very little on the design, and it looked like a million bucks because you’re in

this grand venue.” And while the rental fees for some ornate and/or historical spaces can be significant, the ROI should be borne in mind when the goal is to drive attendance (e.g., a customer-facing event).

Oftentimes, people will know of such a venue and be excited to attend an event there, as opposed to a created space that, while fabulously designed, is unfamiliar to them. In that case, using a crowd-pleasing venue can be more of a “should have” than a “could have.” Miller adds that all the ancillary costs associated with a given venue should be laid out, so there are no surprises. That includes details such as whether they have tables and chairs, and the caterers on their preferred list. “So when the client comes to us and says, ‘We have this budget for the event, and we’d like to have it at this venue,’ we say, ‘Here’s what you need to know before you fall in love with that venue,’” Miller relates.

### AV Features

There are certain features of audio-visual technology that fall into the “must have” category, although a planner may not realize it. For example, backup projectors and computers are an added cost, but not one that should be avoided, Miller maintains. “You need to be prepared. That’s not the area to cut costs. If you’re on the stage delivering a message or an awards ceremony (and there is a technical problem with the system), it’s embarrassing,” she says.

There are less risky ways to save, such as taking care not to use more screens than necessary given the audience size. In addition, discounts on AV can sometimes be obtained by pushing the hotelier — pre-contract signing — to “take the time to negotiate with the third-party vendors, especially the exclusive third-party vendors that are supporting the event that you have to use,” Lindsey recommends. “Many times the response will be ‘No, cannot do’ because it’s an outside vendor. Well, that’s not the answer, because if you’re going to make me use them, I need to make sure I’m getting a good price on it. You can get them to go a little further by engaging that

third-party vendor to make the commitment in order to get the business.”

### Ancillary Fees

Keeping track of hotel pricing trends on all levels is important to protecting the bottom line, and that includes ancillary charges. “Resort fees are getting really high,” Fisher observes. “I’m having a hard time negotiating out of them. Internet fees I’m finding are going down a bit.” Together with parking, resort fees and Internet-access charges “seem to be the top three hotel/resort ancillary charges,” Hentges comments. “All three are negotiable; if you cannot get these 100 percent waived, ask for discounts. Review what the resort fee provides, and if you know your attendees do not use all the features, share that information with your hotel salesperson.”

Knowing the specific needs of one’s group and meeting is thus critical to determining the impact of ancillary fees and the negotiation focus. For example, what Internet fees will the group incur across the property, not just in the guest rooms? The answer may well be different if it’s an incentive program vs. a training session. Also consider what labor costs will be incurred. “Typically the hotel



**Kathy L. Miller**  
President  
Total Event Resources  
Schaumburg, IL

*“One of the best things the buyer can do is be flexible with their dates because a lot of the hotels are filling holes: 2016, ’17 and ’18 are booked with holes.”*

will have their in-house electricians and then, depending on the facility and what you’re designing, carpenters, decorators or teamsters. You just need to know what your labor requirements are going into it,” says Miller. “How you design the event around that knowledge is important.”

Other ancillary charges of note include the following:

- **Re-keying office and storage spaces.** “Lately there have been charges for that service, which you can negotiate out upfront,” Lindsey says.
- **Displaced minibar items.** Many hotels in Las Vegas have items in their minibars under a sensor that detects if an item is displaced. “So if you move the item it is considered sold and that item’s cost will be applied to the room bill,” Hentges explains. “During a recent Scottsdale site visit, I came across this same concept in one of their hotels. This additional expense is important to share with your attendees.”
- **Early checkout fees.** Hentges suggests reviewing this contract clause as it sometimes happens that an attendee may need to depart earlier than expected. “You should not have to pay for an early checkout fee in addition to already paying for the guest room,” she maintains.
- **Additional gratuity.** “There seems to be a trend in room service charges where the gratuity is already included and shown on the receipt, but then there is another line item called ‘additional gratuity’ for the guest to fill in,” Hentges points out.
- **Housekeeping charges.** Hentges suggests that “If these charges are mandatory, negotiate that nightly turndown service is included.”

### Flexible Negotiation

Negotiating concessions can sometimes reach a standstill where the hotel representative won’t budge on a particular item. In that case, it’s important to bear in mind that there can be different routes to the same (or similar) level of savings. “Maybe you’re trying to get a free coffee break, but what the hotel can offer is a deeper discount on all the gal-



**Dale Fisher, CMP**  
Senior Project Manager  
Takeda Pharmaceutical Company  
Cambridge, MA

*“Resort fees are getting really high. I’m having a hard time negotiating out of them. Internet fees I’m finding are going down a bit.”*

lons of coffee that you’re ordering for the duration of the conference,” Lindsey describes. “And that might actually save you more money, but you were hung up on wanting a free coffee break. So that’s where having the conversation is essential to getting the bottom-line savings that works for both parties.”

### History Lessons

Keeping a record of these kinds of successes is certainly worthwhile. Much is made of tracking a group’s meeting history with hoteliers, but negotiation history is also important. “I revise my concessions checklist about every nine months based on learning from previous meetings,” says Lindsey. And that list is part of the knowledge sharing among the five members of her department. “We share the concessions checklist, and we all add to it and discuss it periodically,” she says. “We talk quite a bit to share our successes and our learnings and standards. For example, ‘if the venue won’t say yes to this, here’s the fallback position we would take.’”

“It’s really important not to have just one person who is a savvy negotiator.” Especially with the current market conditions, the more savvy negotiators on the front line, the better for the bottom line. **C&IT**



## Site Selection

# Activity Venues Add an Extra Measure of Fun and Flair to Events

By Mark Rowh

A Welcome Change of Pace Spurs Greater Creativity and Imagination

When people complain about meetings, most often an organization's internal meetings draw the most criticism. But while conferences and offsite meetings often provide a welcome change of pace, that may not always be enough. To provide a memorable experience for those attending, a measure of fun is worth considering as long as extra activities provide solid support to the meeting's overall objectives.

gets them excited to be part of the collective process."

Nadal recently held a successful event at **ChocXO Bean to Bar Chocolatier** in Irvine, California, for members of Marriott's General Manager's Advisory Council. The total of 65 guests not only engaged in discussions about future company initiatives, but also enjoyed the facility's special activities.

"ChocXO provides both an educational and interactive experience that anyone from any background, age or gender would enjoy," she says. "They provide you with the ability to live out your childhood fantasy of running free in a chocolate factory. What could be better than that?"

She notes that in choosing the venue, a primary factor was identifying a location with an experiential component, and ChocXO met that goal while providing a one-of-a-kind experience.

"When you drive into what you can describe as a corporate park and find yourself in a chocolate factory, you immediately know that you are in for a rare experience," Nadal says. "Having the opportunity to astonish your guests from beginning to end is like hitting the event-planning jackpot."

ChocXO has several locations, and its Irvine, California, factory is available for meetings that are supplemented by special events. Options include an hour-long complete factory tour showcasing the chocolate-making process as well as tastes of the product. The tour includes an educational wall and a scale model of a cacao tree, along with an overview of how chocolate is fermented, dried and processed. Participants get to sample raw cacao pulp, cocoa nibs, cocoa liquor and finished chocolate bars.

For an even more hands-on approach, groups of 15–20 participants go into the kitchen and make their own chocolate bark. They pour liquid chocolate over a sheet pan and then

add special toppings. Once the bark chills and crystallizes in a refrigerator, participants break it up and bag it to take it home.

Many planners are now exploring venues that include some type of activities to supplement meetings and in many cases, become part of the sessions themselves. Not only can this make an overall event more appealing, but it may also provide a welcome break from the core business at hand while also promoting teamwork.

"It's important for teambuilding to have social activities interspersed through an intensive working conference," says Denise Sonni-Birlin, whose job as senior executive coordinator, research and drug discovery for BioMarin Pharmaceutical in Novato, California, includes meeting planning. She recently coordinated a conference at **Asilomar State Beach and Conference Grounds** for nearly 400 employees. She says the venue is one favored by pharmaceutical companies. "It's a great value with a beautiful location and wonderful staff."

At Asilomar, located in Pacific Grove, California, corporate groups experience a retreat-like setting on 107 acres of coastal land. With 312 guest rooms and 30,000 sf of meeting space, the park has accommodations for groups up to 650 people.

Activities include walking tours, beach volleyball, bird watching, hiking, surfing and standup paddleboarding. Team events range from beach Olympics and survivor games to bike tours along the coast.

Along with the park's offerings, she says that nearby activities also can enhance the experience for attendees. Sonni-Birlin especially recommends reserving the entire **Monterey Bay Aquarium** for an evening appetizer, dessert and wine reception.

"It's located about a 10-minute drive from Asilomar," she says. "It is an awesome experience that everyone loved."

Other parks also offer activity-focused options. At **Starved Rock State Park** in Oglesby, Illinois, meeting participants enjoy a variety of ac-



At Asilomar, corporate groups of up to 650 people enjoy a variety of activities and programs such as this food truck event at the Pacific Wines & Spirits annual sales conference. (Inset) Pacific Gas and Electric attendees during their CSR clean-up event at nearby Del Monte Beach.

"Corporate meetings are generally held to discuss incredibly important and thought-provoking topics," says Breana Nadal, a senior events manager for Marriott Corporation in Irvine, California. She notes that in a typical meeting day, attendees can spend up to eight hours in an atmosphere that demands imagination and creativity.

"There is no better way to cultivate that type of thought pattern than to add a unique and fun portion to such an event," she says. "Letting attendees take time to relax and let their thoughts come together organically not only benefits the overall goal but also



tivities including guided hikes and scavenger hunts that incorporate the park's history into the competition. If requested in advance, hiking guides share thoughts and experiences on teambuilding, character development and survival. Other options include an art program where participants complete paintings in a team environment and then have a finished product for their home or office. Or in a nod to the park's lookout tower, teams strive to build the tallest standing tower out of marshmallows and spaghetti. Individual personality analysis is part of the activity.

The 2,600-acre park features an array of waterfalls and canyons, with 13 miles of trails that follow rugged bluffs overlooking the Illinois River. The historic Starved Rock Lodge & Conference Center has 69 guest rooms supplemented by 21 cabin rooms located on the property.

Meeting facilities include a 2,200-sf room with a capacity of 200 attendees theater-style and 120 participants in classroom format, along with four

small to mid-sized rooms accommodating from 14 to 60 guests, and a separate cabin for groups of 12 to 25 people.

Some wineries also offer a surprising array of activities. **The Mountain Winery** in Saratoga, California, a 600-plus acre Santa Cruz Mountain wine estate located above the Silicon Valley, features more

*“Letting attendees relax and let their thoughts come together organically not only benefits the overall goal but also gets them excited to be part of the collective process.”*

**Breana Nadal**  
Senior Events Manager  
Marriott Corporation  
Irvine, CA

than just wine tasting for corporate events. Along with meeting facilities, the winery offers a number of unusual activities and teambuilding programs for groups.

A custom-built grape stomping platform is used for a two-hour event for up to 20 guests, where participants compete in crushing two barrels of grapes. The activity includes a scavenger hunt, grape toss, and wine bottling and racking as well as a three-course plated dinner.

A gourmet cooking series includes an “hors d’oeuvres war” as well as a chef-for-a-day option. In the “war,” meeting attendees select ingredients from a pantry set up by an executive chef and then compete with colleagues to create the best appetizer for their group to enjoy.

Other activities include an obstacle course, bottle ring toss and wine picnic. An educational series led by a local sommelier includes the option to have a private class connected to a professional meeting. Still other activities range from cigar rolling and dueling pianos to rock climbing, bungee jumping and casino night.

Meeting facilities include a grand hall with a dining capacity of 220 guests and several smaller rooms, as well as an outdoor plaza accommodating up to 2,000 people and another area handling 250 to 500 guests depending on the nature of the function. A 2,500-seat amphitheater also is available.

Other venues play on the glamour of a popular sport or entertainment attraction. That’s the case with **Dallara Indy-Car Factory**. Located less than a mile from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, it offers expansive meeting space as well as racing-related activities. While the primary purpose of the 200,000-sf facility is assembling and testing future Indy-style cars, it also serves as an exciting venue for corporate events. Visitors can explore interactive and hands-on exhibits centered on racing engineering and technology. They can take a walk through a tunnel filled with current race-car blueprints and design concept drawings, or check out a movie about the company. Meeting attendees also enjoy guided tours of the factory, try out racing simulators and ride in actual two-seater cars. Teams also compete in a pit-stop challenge or mobile karting competition.

The facility has 35,000 sf of meeting space including an interactive hall with a capacity of up to 1,200 people, a garage accommodating up to 1,100 and a conference room seating 100.

Dallara offers a true “Indy experience” based on the history of the Indianapolis 500, reports John P. Manos, executive director of JPM Performance Group, an event and performance incentive company based in Cincinnati. He has coordinated a number of events at the site, most recently a combined new product launch and sales meeting at Dallara in October. Most of the 250 attendees



The Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California, offers a wide variety of unique activities and programs including grape stomping, wine tasting, a gourmet cooking series, historic tours and many other activities.



a great addition to the meeting experience,” Manos says.

Still other venues represent efforts to expand offerings in the face of growing competition. For example, many

events. The 100,000-sf facility has one ballroom with approximately 6,000 sf of space and another with 4,600 sf, as well as a 1,000-sf breakout room and a 4,400-sf garden tent. Meeting attendees can take advantage of 32 bowling lanes for competitive teambuilding events or simply enjoy bowling a few games.

With some options, a change of pace from the standard urban location is the main attraction.

At **Spring Creek Ranch**, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, conference participants experience the feel of a traditional Western ranch combined with modern amenities and a variety of entertaining activities. The facility has 125 guest rooms and 3,200 sf of event space offering natural light and views of the Teton mountain range.

*“The ability to brand/logo an Indy car to support the new product launch was a great addition to the meeting experience.”*

**John P. Manos**  
Executive Director  
JPM Performance  
Group  
Cincinnati, OH

were in field sales, but there also were executive management and marketing support personnel in attendance.

“The venue offered many interactive elements, including the opportunity for the attendees to experience a ride in an Indy race car,” he says. A “pit stop quick tire change” competition was especially popular.

“The competitive element was very well received by the sales personnel,” he says.

Manos praises the flexibility of Dallara staff as well the distinctive identity of the location, which in this instance also supported the theme of the meeting.

“The ability to brand/logo an Indy car to support the new product launch was

Along with bowling and a 3,000-sf arcade, **Surfside Bowling and Family Entertainment Center** in Surfside Beach, South Carolina offers private meetings rooms, teambuilding programs and banquet facilities.

Similarly, **Mermaid Entertainment & Event Center** in Mound View, Minnesota, provides space for corporate meetings, trade shows and other business



Breana Nadal, who hosted a group at ChocXO Bean to Bar Chocolatier in Irvine, California, said the experience was like living out your childhood fantasy of running free in a chocolate factory.





Credits: Dallara IndyCar Factory



The Dallara IndyCar Factory offers attendees the chance to explore 200,000 sf of interactive and hands-on exhibits about the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Activities include white-water rafting where teams compete against one another, group tours of **Yellowstone National Park** led by the ranch's resident naturalist, and team scavenger hunts or "amazing races," which offer group challenges set up within a 1,000-acre wildlife refuge property.

Other possibilities range from scenic river trips and tram rides to the top of a mountain, to wildlife safaris in **Grand Teton National Park**, or in winter, snow coach rides or dog sledding.

Offering a similar approach is **California's Ranch at Laguna Beach**, which has 60 guest rooms and a meeting capacity of 300 indoors and 800 outdoors. The 7,000 sf of indoor meeting space will be complemented by a new ballroom in 2016. Along with a golf course, the property features a varied teambuilding curriculum with options including sports, adventures, survivor challenges, an arts/teepee village and "ranch chef" culinary competition.

Other activities include horseback rides, guided nature hikes and winter options such as snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

Another type of experience can be found with high-energy options such as go-karts. **Thunderbolt Indoor Karting** in Richmond, Virginia, offers electric karts in climate-controlled surroundings with the option to use private space for meetings or rent the entire facility. The same goes for **Autobahn Indoor Speeding** in Jacksonville, Florida. Located in an 80,000-sf facility, the speedway includes a conference room and party room, and can accommodate group sizes from

*"Meetings aren't always fun. Adding some entertaining activities can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone."*

**Ellison Bourbon**  
Events Planner  
Globality  
Menlo Park, CA

eight to several hundred. Activities include racing heats with a final race leading to an awards ceremony. Teambuilding options include a blindfold challenge, team endurance race and pit-crew challenge.

Looking forward, a number of venues slated for opening or expanding in 2016 will include special activities as part of the appeal they offer for corporate meetings.

At **Hilton Anatole**, a 1,600-room hotel in the design district of Dallas, a new \$15 million resort-style outdoor pool complex will feature multiple swimming pools as well as an outdoor restaurant and a swim-up bar.

Scheduled to open in May, the addition will allow guests to enjoy a 630-foot-long lazy river.

Another new offering in 2016 will be **NLand Surf Park** in Austin, Texas, being marketed as North America's first inland surf park. Slated for opening in spring 2016, the park will feature artificially created waves designed to let anyone, regardless of previous experience, experience the thrill of surfing. For corporate teambuilding, activities will include dry-land training, professional demos and the opportunity to be videotaped for inclusion in personal or group montages.

The park will feature 11 surfing areas with four different surfing levels ranging from beginner to professional. The latest in wave generation technology will create 1-foot, 4-foot and 6-foot waves.

Whatever the venue, meetings that include some extra activities can go a long way toward enhancing the overall experience.

"Meetings aren't always fun," says Ellison Bourbon, an events planner at Globality, an IT firm in Menlo Park, California. "Adding some entertaining activities can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone."

In her current role and with previous employers, she has coordinated meetings highlighted by activities ranging from archery to grape-crushing contests.

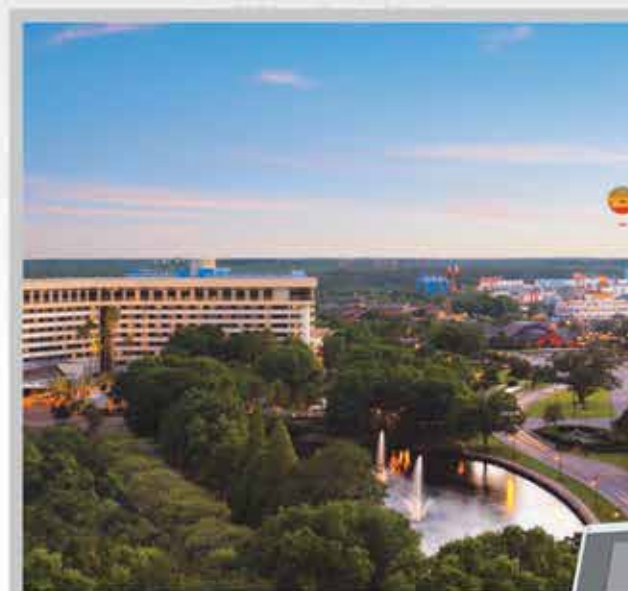
She says that along with other benefits, the value of providing opportunities to step outside routine business relationships should not be discounted.

"It's nice when everyone is on the same playing field," she says. "An intern can beat the CEO at some type of enjoyable competition. And people do like to compete."

The end result can be a good morale booster, Bourbon says, even if some extra coordination is needed.

"It just takes a little initiative by the event planner," she says. "Do something outside the box." **C&IT**

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## The State of the Airline Industry

### 2015 Brought Changes — Some Good for Passengers, Some Not — and 2016 Appears to Offer More of the Same

By Christine Loomis

**N**orth American airlines have legitimate bragging rights to two elements of air travel these days: They are among the safest airlines in the world and they can claim the highest per passenger earnings of all airlines in the world (\$18.12) and a 7.5 percent net profit margin.

In noting the industry's overall \$29.3 billion net profit in his state-of-the-airline-industry speech at the 2015 annual meeting of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) in Miami, director general and CEO Tony Tyler emphasized that those profits only translate to an overall 4 percent net-profit margin.

"Let's keep things in perspective," he said. "Apple, a single company, earned \$13.6 billion in the second quarter of this year. That's just under half the expected full-year profit of the entire airline in-

dustry. We don't begrudge anyone their business success. But it is important for our stakeholders, particularly governments, to understand that the business of providing global connectivity is still a very tough one."

The comparison is somewhat disingenuous. Computer buyers still have plenty of choice in the type of product and the price they pay for it. Agreeing to purchase increased memory or a better camera because you want them is not the same as having to purchase a business-class seat for many hundreds of dollars more because you're 6 feet 3 inches tall and coach seats don't even comfortably accommodate a 5-foot-4-inch woman these days.

Airline travel is not the luxury it once was; it is a necessity for business travelers in an increasingly global setting. As more

and more companies go global, flights for executives and other employees are of a longer duration and often on shorter notice when deals are nonexistent.

The increase in global businesses translates directly to an increase in global meetings and conventions, meaning many meeting planners and attendees spend much of their time in the air on international flights. Business travelers typically have to be ready to work when they land, so comfort on these flights is not a luxury or an option; it's a necessity — and the airlines can bank on these travelers paying premium prices as a result.

#### Nickel-and-Diming Passengers

The true state of the airline industry can be summed up realistically in several ways, as airlines do legitimately struggle to increase their relatively low profit margins.

First, airplanes are being designed with an increased number of seats in space that has not increased. Seats are closer together and dimensions are shrinking front to back and from side to side.

Airlines are continuing to consolidate, leaving passengers fewer options for comparison shopping.

And passengers are being charged an array of extra fees for an array of "ser-

vices," and the fees might or might not be apparent when tickets are purchased. Depending on the airline you fly and the class of ticket, you might be charged for checked baggage, carry-on baggage, snacks, water, Wi-Fi, extra leg room, earlier boarding and other "conveniences." Some airlines have considered charging for use of bathrooms! At the root of the fee structure is a 2009 ruling by the IRS holding that these fees are not subject to taxation, providing huge incentive for airlines to charge them.

Airlines maintain that "à la carte" charges provide passengers with options so they pay only for things they want. Whether food, water or the need to carry clothes with you on a trip really can be considered "options" is up for debate. In terms of the transparency of fees, the U.S. Senate and passenger rights groups have taken the airlines to task.

In a report released in August 2015, Senate Democrats accused the airlines of "nickel-and-diming" passengers with fees. "The traveling public is being nickel-and-dimed to death," said U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson of Florida in a statement. Nelson, top Democrat of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, continued, "What's worse is that many fliers don't learn about the actual cost of their travel until it's too late."

Consumer groups have long complained that the fees are a money grab for airlines looking to rack up record profits at the expense of passengers. "This report echoes the same issues Travelers United has been speaking about with the Department of Transportation (DOT) and members of Congress for years," says Charlie Leocha, chairman of Travelers United, a passenger advocacy group.

#### Consumer Advocacy

Leocha says there is much work to be done on behalf of airline passengers, who have very little to celebrate while airlines have much. "Airlines are flying more passengers on fewer planes than ever before, which means travelers are packed into these aluminum tubes like sardines. The airlines are making more money than ever in history. Jet fuel prices have plummeted and airfares

have remained steady — obviously not a great outcome for passengers. Airlines are making comparison shopping as difficult as possible and fighting DOT at every point whenever the department and consumers call for more transparency."

But, Leocha notes, there is good news as well. "The consumer presence is stronger than ever in Congress and at DOT," he says. "Finally, consumer groups such as Travelers United have gained credibility in the battle for customer service. Change comes slowly, but the recent adoption of the full-fare advertising rule and 24-hour change rule has made a big difference."

Such changes don't come easy, according to Leocha, who says the airlines contest every sentence of the written rules — and more. "The airlines sued DOT in the Washington, DC, District Court of Appeals, claiming that the new rules went beyond DOT's mandate to protect consumers," Leocha says. "But the final court ruling was a full vindication of DOT and Travelers United's positions."

#### Fee Transparency and Tax Reform

Travelers United hopes to soon have a new rule in place for transparency of seat-reservation fees and baggage fees. "The 24-hour rule and the full-fare advertising rule were part of Passenger Protection 2 rulemaking, Leocha says. "Passenger Protection 3 rulemaking has already been drafted and comments are closed. We are expecting a final rule by spring, which will mandate that more ancillary fees must be disclosed by airlines through all points of sale during the sales process. That will mean that travel agents will be able to tell passengers exactly how much seat reservations will cost and the specifics of baggage and other fees."

Washington, DC, is the epicenter of plans to create a better air-travel system across the board, a charge led by the U.S. Travel Association and its president and CEO, Roger Dow. In June, U.S. Travel presented its plan to Congress, a plan aimed at fixing the nation's struggling air-travel infrastructure and promoting a healthy, well-functioning passenger

## Airline Programs for Planners

Here's how the benefits of booking meeting or incentive air travel through U.S. airlines stack up.

### ✈ AMERICAN AIRLINES

**Required number:** 10 or more.

**Benefits:** Using "Zone Fares," American will guarantee fares from various geographical departure points to a single destination. Fares are good for midweek meetings as no Saturday night stay is required. Zone Fares are good for travel originating in the United States to North America, Europe, Caribbean, Latin America and Asia.

**Future plans:** American will provide "future-date pricing," allowing planners to forecast travel expenses for incentive groups.

**Add-ons:** American has preferred partnerships with Avis and Budget to reduce rates on car rentals for group members.

**Contact:** Online RFPs or call 800-221-2255.

### ✈ DELTA MEETING NETWORK

**Required number:** More than 10.

**Benefits:** Online booking tools and "robust scheduling options" with access to more than 300 destinations for groups traveling from two or more cities. A dedicated team of meeting specialists to register a meeting and manage planners' requests "from beginning to end," all with "cost-saving options." Meeting organizers are offered exclusive discounts on fares in most classes of service.

**Add-ons:** Access to more than 40 Delta Sky Club locations worldwide and SkyMiles rewards toward award travel.

**Contact for new meetings business:** 800-328-2216

### ✈ JETBLUE INCENTIVES GROUP AND MEETING PROGRAM

**Required number:** 10 or more.

**Benefits:** Dedicated agents are available Monday through Friday. "We're the only airline that offers free, unlimited name changes." Ability for planners



to book blocked space from one location to another or individual space from multiple origins to a single destination. “Great rates”: JetBlue will release up to 10 percent of seats up to 60 days prior to departure with no penalty. Low deposit of \$50 per person to confirm seats, and JetBlue allows a deviation of 10 percent at no charge — though you pay the difference in fare. Final payment is due just 30 days prior to departure.

**Contact:** Online or call 888-JETBLUE (538-2583), Option 4.

✈ **SOUTHWEST AIRLINES**

**Required number:** 10 or more for the Group Travel Program: 150 required to apply for a Meetings Agreement Request or \$100,000 annual air spend on Southwest for working with a dedicated corporate sales team.

**Benefits:** According to Southwest spokesperson Thais Hanson, Southwest is in the process of revving up its offers to business and meeting travelers. “SWABIZ, Southwest Airlines’ booking tool for corporations, offers companies of all sizes robust reporting and tracking at no extra cost. Recently, Southwest Airlines launched a meetings program that provides discounts and loyalty to convention and meeting travelers through the SWABIZ platform. We are optimis-

tic about the future of SWABIZ as we are currently exploring new platform enhancements and incentives in 2016.”

**Add-ons:** Southwest’s standard procedures are extremely business-friendly, including flexible refundable and nonrefundable fares, no change fees and no bag fees for the first two checked bags.

**Contact:** [www.southwest.com/corporatetravel](http://www.southwest.com/corporatetravel) or 800-435-9792

✈ **UNITED MEETINGS**

**Required number:** 10 or more traveling on a common flight to a common destination (United Groups); 20 or more traveling from two or more originating points to a meeting or event destination (United Meetings).

**Benefits:** Guaranteed airfare for groups of 10 or more on a common flight, priority check-in and a group coordinator to assist at the airport. For 20 or more traveling to an event from two or more departure cities, benefits include discounts on published fares or global zone fare request and the opportunity for planners/companies to earn productivity credits toward upgrades, United Club passes, United Club membership, domestic travel certificates and beverage vouchers. United’s meeting travel provides choice of Global Zone Fares or discounts on published fares. United also offers Star Alliance Conventions

Plus and Star Alliance Meetings Plus for international conventions and meetings, providing Star Alliance airlines’ schedules and discounts at a single point of contact as well as other benefits.

**Add-ons:** The United Meetings team will help planners communicate fare savings to attendees via customized flyers. United will provide a flyer template including the meeting name, date, city and discounts, along with the special Meeting Reference Number and Z Code. Planners can include these flyers in mailings to ensure that every attendee can take advantage of the savings. The United Meetings team can provide additional tools to promote United as the meeting’s official carrier, including copywriting suggestions, airline photos and United logos.

**Contact:** [www.united.com](http://www.united.com)

✈ **VIRGIN AMERICA GROUPS & MEETINGS**

**Required number:** 10 or more.

**Benefits:** Groups flying from the same city to the same destination may be eligible for a deal on fares. Likewise, groups flying from multiple cities to the same meeting or convention might be eligible for a fare discount — but the airline has to look at the details first (how many people from where and to where). Planners must send the name of each guest 30 days

prior. A deposit of \$100 per person is due 7 days after booking with full payment 45 days prior to flying or immediately if less than 45 days out. The discounts are typically good for booking online, individually or via phone.

**Add-ons:** Virgin planes are uniformly conducive to business and to comfort. Virgin’s fleet of Airbus A320s offers: 110-volt power outlets and USB jacks in every row; video touch-screen at every seatback with on-demand menus and countless entertainment options; interior mood lighting with 12 shades that adjust to exterior lighting; consistent in-flight amenities and products on every flight in every market; main-cabin seats with six inches of extra legroom as well as complimentary entertainment and select food and drinks; and first-class seats with all of the above plus custom white-leather seats with nearly two feet of extra legroom as well as full food and beverage service and complimentary on-demand entertainment.

Passengers also have a seat-to-seat chat and delivery feature that allows them to send a message along with a cocktail, snack or meal to a fellow on-board guest. A dedicated support team based at headquarters handles calls exclusively for corporate customers.

**Contact:** [groups@virginamerica.com](mailto:groups@virginamerica.com) or call 866-339-0169. For corporate programs: [corporate.sales@virginamerica.com](mailto:corporate.sales@virginamerica.com). — **CL**

aviation system. Central to the plan is a tax cut designed to offset an adjustment to the Passenger Facility Charge (PFC), the local user fee that finances airport projects. According to U.S. Travel calculations, tax cuts would reduce fares by \$9.50 to \$25.50 per ticket.

The specifics of the plan call for the elimination of five passenger aviation taxes, including the Domestic Passenger Ticket Tax, the tax on international arrivals and departures, the tax on mileage rewards and the tax on flights between the continental U.S. and Alaska or Hawaii. It also allows local airports to increase their PFC to adequately fund improvement projects. U.S. Travel believes these tax changes also will eliminate airlines’ incentive to collect all those ancillary fees, a boon for passengers.

While the plan is complex with multiple parts, U.S. Travel’s desired result is to move the country toward a set of national aviation policies that is pro-competition, pro-growth and pro-traveler.

It’s all part of a bill to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration differently — and better — than in the past. Dow put it this way: “FAA reauthorization presents an amazing opportunity to

address a host of issues in our air travel system, and we should not squander it by only addressing a couple of the needs of our air travel system. The FAA bill should represent a comprehensive approach.

“The issue of infrastructure financing is particularly contentious. We continue to believe that the PFC, as a pure user fee, is the ideal means to address our severe infrastructure challenges. But finding the math to be able to include an airfare tax cut is a critical new piece, and has been expressly designed to address the concerns of some who have attacked the PFC approach.”

In the final analysis, Dow says, “We are supremely confident that on this platform, we will be able to build strong support for modernizing our infrastructure financing model, fostering a competitive aviation marketplace that benefits travelers and finally giving this country the air transportation system that it needs and deserves.”

**The Bigger Picture**

Why is all of this so important? It’s not really a matter of how much profit airlines make or how much snacks cost on a flight, as much as these ruffle the

feathers of passengers who just want an easy, comfortable way to travel where they need to go. It’s the big picture. It’s about a strong economy that’s critical for North America and its citizens. Delays, cancellations, costs and other travel headaches cause citizens to take fewer trips, to meet via Skype instead of in person, for example. That costs the economy billions. In 2013 alone, it cost the U.S. economy a staggering \$35.7 billion.

Big-picture plans don’t negate the growing array of specific changes and airline policies that U.S. Travel, Travelers United and other groups have to fight. Between June and December 2015, U.S. Travel made statements about a variety of issues, including a bill that proposes to take funds paid by airline passengers to the TSA and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for security and divert them to the nation’s highway fund. While Dow praised the bill for taking a long-term approach to infrastructure improvements, he noted that U.S. Travel does not agree with diverting the funds.

“Airline passengers should not be a piggy bank to pay for highway investments that benefit highway users,” Dow says.

Leocha was more blunt in his opposi-

tion: “CBP fees are going up, and that extra money is going to fill potholes instead of to the security of airline passengers.”

**Closing the Open Skies?**

One of the biggest conflicts between the airlines and groups with passenger and broad economic interests in mind has been related to the longstanding Open Skies policy, which has welcomed foreign carriers into U.S. airports to serve international routes not served by many U.S. airlines, promoted competition, created relationships and partnerships between U.S. and foreign airlines and provided millions of dollars to U.S. airports. Now, American, United and Delta want to alter the terms of Open Skies and limit a growing fleet of Middle East airlines from expanding into the United States. Because some of these airlines are subsidized by their governments, “the Big Three” claim they represent unfair competition.

U.S. Travel, Travelers United, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and many others disagree, stating that the goal of the Big Three is simply to stifle competition, which will ultimately hurt passengers and the U.S. economy.

“When the Big Three first embarked on their lobbying campaign against Open Skies, they had our attention because they claimed that their position was about protecting U.S. jobs,” Dow stated in June. “But it took about 30 seconds of reflection to realize that breaking those agreements is likely to have terrible consequences for U.S. employment, and now we have research in hand conclusively illustrating that.”

An Oxford Economics analysis found that passengers connecting from the Gulf airlines to U.S. carriers generated \$140 million in revenue for U.S. airlines, and that more than half of the 620,000 passengers who transferred to U.S. carriers transferred to flights operated by the Big Three. The data also doesn’t support claims that the Gulf airlines “stole” passengers from U.S. carriers. Of the 1,700 routes the U.S. airlines and Gulf airlines flew in April 2015, they competed on only two. And when they did compete, the data found that they served different passengers from different parts of the globe.

Said Dow: “The travel community weighs every policy proposal against a very basic set of criteria: Is it pro-com-

petition, pro-growth and pro-traveler? The Big Three’s move against Open Skies epic-fails every part of that test.

“Moreover, momentum in Washington is starting to turn against them. I implore my friends at American, Delta and United to abandon this folly and invest the resources in far more valuable pursuits, like real investments in the passenger experience that will get more people traveling.”

Some battles will be won by travel industry and consumer groups and others will not. Passengers should probably assume that planes with more seats and less room are coming, but also that air travel continues to be very safe and affordable — if not excessively comfortable for coach passengers.

More upscale options also will continue to be available to those who can book business and first class, but most of us should pack our own water and food and be savvy enough to take advantage of programs such as TSA Pre-Check and Global Entry that reduce our time in security lines, as well as early-boarding options that guarantee room in overhead compartments for our bags. **C&IT**



# What's Cookin' for 2016

## Creative, Customized Menus Keep Attendees Coming Back for More

By Karen Brost



**T**he playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “There is no sincerer love than the love of food.” And if he were to go to a meeting today, he’d very likely see that planners, chefs and other food and beverage professionals are helping make sure that meeting attendees can take their love of food to a whole new level.

“I’d say the biggest trend we are seeing in food and beverage is the need to have healthier options and more attention to gluten-free items,” explains Melynda Hilliard, MBA, CMP, who is director, events for Skillsoft, an online learning company with U.S. headquarters in Nashua, New Hampshire. “Having restrictions really forces event professionals to think more creatively while planning meals and breaks.

“Our attendees are becoming more educated about the amazing gourmet options that are available on a regular basis,” she adds, “therefore, we have to be open to make our chicken something different and present the potatoes in a

way that isn’t just mashed. Yet, while being creative, we also have our budgets that provide further restrictions to these options. It’s no longer the simple buffet with basic items; it’s the fancy, yet reasonable options that have people walking away feeling like they ate a good and

healthy meal that didn’t clog their arteries.”

### Special Orders Don’t Upset Us

One ongoing trend is that hotels and con-

ference centers are doing a much better job of accommodating attendees who have special requests such as entrées suitable for vegetarian, vegan or gluten-free diets or if they have allergies to certain food items such as nuts or shellfish.

Chef Mike Jackson, director of food and beverage for the Deloitte University Hotel and Conference Center in Westlake, Texas, which is managed by Benchmark Hospitality International, “reminisced” about the days when meeting attendees who were vegetarian often would be served the same thing: pasta primavera. Luckily for them, those days appear to be long gone. “We’ve really had to up our game on our banquet menus,” he says. “We really have to take (special dietary requests) into consideration and make sure that each one of these guests has an interesting and unique dining experience.”

Jackson explains that he and his team take these special requests into consideration when planning plated banquet meals as well as buffets. “I want to make sure that there’s a lot of vegetarian choices. I want to make sure that there are a lot of choices that I can label as gluten free. That really starts with your basic preparation in the kitchen, and there are some simple things that we do at Deloitte University. Instead of using roux as a thickener, we’ll use cornstarch or arrowroot or vegetable purées. A lot of things that might not have been accessible to guests in the past because of the gluten, suddenly are available, and, if anything, we’re making the dishes a little bit lighter and healthier.”

He adds that the more advance notice the food and beverage team receives about guests with special

Chef Mike Jackson, director of food and beverage for Deloitte University Hotel and Conference Center, is making dishes “lighter and healthier.”

*“Whether it’s a gathering for upwards of 200 or a smaller, intimate one with 15 or so, guests still like to have that interaction with the people that are actually serving them.”*

**Tom Garcia**, Vice President, Food & Beverage  
Benchmark Hospitality International, The Woodlands, TX

dietary requests, the more prepared the team can be, and that 72 hours’ notice is a good guideline. That being said, even if no one requests, for example, a vegetarian meal in advance, his team still will be prepared to meet last-minute requests.

Since there could potentially be a wide variety of special menu requests within a single group, it takes some skill and planning to identify those guests. Jackson describes the system he uses. “We give our guests that register with special dietary needs a special card that has a purple dot on it, and whenever they sit down, they put it by their place setting. It’s not very obvious to any of their dining companions, but that alerts us, and especially our wait staff, that that guest has a special dietary need, and so the waiter is going to discreetly ask them what we can do to make sure they have a good dining experience. We want them to have a seamless dining experience like everyone else. We don’t want everybody else at the table to be enjoying dinner while they’re waiting for us to scramble and prepare a plate for them.”

### A Treat for the Senses

Tom Garcia, vice president of food and beverage for Benchmark Hospitality International, explains that when planning breaks for meeting attendees, his company likes to involve more than just the sense of taste. “It’s the music, the ambiance, the smell, the lighting. As we put our breaks out there, we’re trying to enact all of the senses.” He shares an example. “We have an apple break where you have that cider smell as you walk in, and the colors that we use focus on reds, and the music is jazz. We have dried apples, a fresh baked apple tart and other items like that.”

“We also did a tea break that really engaged all of the senses,” Jackson adds. “We were steeping some very aromatic teas and had some food items that were



going along with it. Oftentimes, meetings are very heavy with a lot of information in your face, so we’re really trying to make the break more of a relaxing period so (attendees) can softly recharge and reinvigorate themselves before going back in for more meeting content.”

As Hilliard notes, many meeting attendees are trying to focus on eating more healthfully. But there are still plenty of people who enjoy a special treat now and then. “We’ll still have those fun foods out there,” Garcia notes. “If somebody wants an M&M or a gummy bear, they can have them.”

### Creative Cocktails

Jackson notes that there is now more of an emphasis in using fresh products in the creation of cocktails, including the use of custom-made bitters and mixers. “People now tend to be a little bit more adventuresome with their dining, and they’re doing that with their beverages, as well. They’re not necessarily stuck in that rut that ‘I’m a chardonnay person.’ We try to create craft cocktails that are a little bit more seasonal in nature that go along with the more traditional beverages that we would serve in a private banquet event.”

Garcia says that Benchmark is bringing techniques used in freestanding restaurants to the banquet room, such as hiring the right staff. “We’re especially looking at bartenders that are emotion-



ally connected and that are invested in what they're doing. Instead of going to the Boston guide for drinks, they're creating their own. We're just trying to have that connectivity. Whether it's a gathering for upwards of 200 or a smaller, intimate one with 15 or so, guests still like to have that interaction with the people that are actually serving them."

### Connecting With the Chefs

Garcia also says that having action stations, where chefs prepare food in front of attendees, also fosters that sense of connectivity. They give attendees an opportunity to interact with the chef and ask questions about how the food is prepared, and it also gives them a chance to connect with nature if the event is being held outdoors. Garcia gives a few examples, such as Benchmark's Eaglewood

Resort & Spa near Chicago that offers golf course views or Snow King Resort in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where attendees enjoy being next to the mountains.

For planners who haven't used action stations lately, it's time for another look. "To me, one of the biggest things that has happened over the last five years is that the technology has changed," Jackson explains. "That gives us a lot more versatility to do the action stations, especially in a banquet setting. You used to have those little butane burners where you were pretending to be cooking, but you really couldn't do serious mass production out there. Now there are people like Evo that make the electric griddles that will get up to 550 degrees. You can do induction woks that could easily produce food for a couple of hundred people at a time.

"Right now, where I am," he continues,

"we're looking at a ventless convection oven that we can actually put out at our coffee breaks, so we're baking our croissants and muffins and cookies in the afternoons right in front of the guests and pulling them out of the oven. It has a built-in filtration system and a built-in fire suppression system, so it meets all of the codes, and really your only limitation on where you use it is having the power source. Those are the things that really help us take the kitchen into the ballroom, so to speak. In the past, it was more that we would be doing these things for show. Now, with the new modern equipment, we can actually be cooking and creating complex dishes in front of the guests."

### Blasts From the Past

Garcia also says that in terms of food and beverage, what's old is new again. "That's going to continue out there as a trend. 'We've been kicking around ideas like it would be cool to experience a chateaubriand, or it's pretty cool to have those old chef salads.'"

Says Jackson, "From a chef's perspective, I think a lot of the classic cooking techniques are really having a resurgence." He mentions an upcoming James Beard dinner that he and several other chefs from Benchmark are participating in. "Part of our theme for our dinner is 'preserving the past,' and all of the chefs are making a play on classic food preservation techniques like making charcuterie.

"A lot of the steps that for a long time were being outsourced are now being craft made in-house like smoking your own bacon and creating specialty condiments — ketchups and steak sauces, things like that," he explains.

### Global Trends

Mark Cooper, CEO of the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC), notes the major trends his organization is experiencing worldwide. "Not just destination-themed food, but locally sourced food (and knowing the provenance of it)." He gave the use of local microbreweries as an example. "You feel like you're experiencing a little bit of the region you traveled to for the conference."

He adds, "On the drink side again, the

*"It's no longer the simple buffet with basic items; it's the fancy, yet reasonable options that have people walking away feeling like they ate a good and healthy meal that didn't clog their arteries."*

Melynda Hilliard, MBA, CMP, Director, Events  
Skillsoft, Nashua, NH



trend at the moment is to use tea in cocktails. We've seen tea as a popular drink from a health perspective and how it's been embraced around the world, and we're seeing tea-infused cocktails for drink receptions."

### Food That Inspires Networking

Another trend Cooper identifies is the use of food to support networking. "This is probably the most important trend. The objective around meetings is to meet people, share ideas and build relationships. The time you do that is generally outside of the sessions of the meeting itself, which is during your food and beverage events." He says that the scenario of sitting around a 6-foot round table and only meeting the people immediately to your left or right no longer works. "This is especially true for the people now who come together for meetings who are remote workers working from home," he describes. "They're not meeting their colleagues that they're talking to every day in the corridor in the office anymore, so these are important times to get together to build relationships and share ideas.

"The way that food can influence that is to offer easy, accessible, unplated food so that people can reach out and eat and drink while talking and walking and meeting other people." Cooper continues. "There's nothing worse than having a reception where the food that's on offer is food that you can put on a plate and you walk out into the room and realize that it is totally impractical — you need to cut it up to eat it or it's got rice in there and there's no chance of eating it. It's about food and service almost like Spanish tapas where you can sit there and be talking and the waiter or waitress is continually bringing options to you. With-

out knowing it, before the night is done, you're almost through a starter, a main course and dessert, and you've met 20 great people in an hour and a half. That's where I think food is really important. It brings people together, and great relationships are born in that way." Like the other experts, Cooper also notes that the focus on health is a key trend. "Small portion sizes are important," he states. "It's 'in with the flavor, out with the fats.'"

### Finessing the Finale

Cooper mentions another trend: "The change from having big gala dinners to now having more finale events where they're innovative, more imaginative and not just your sit-down, three-course plated gala dinner at the end of the conference."



*"Talking with other planners...we survived the recent cupcake trend, are wading through the farm-to-table trend, and are really ready to see what clients come up with next."*

Emily Boykin, CMP, Meeting Planner  
Onyx Meetings and Events, Overland Park, KS

He gave an example that was very close to home — a recent conference for his own association, IACC, where they had an awards ceremony followed by food station buffets with a chef presence. "We had different types of seating areas to suit different people. There were some chairs at rounds and other areas with sofas and others with high stools and (bar-type) tables. We provided different styles of food in different areas of the room and different styles of seating for people to come together in different environments, and we even had a dance floor in the corner, as well. We had all of that going on. It was a finale instead of making it a gala dinner." He explained that this format is also more

comfortable for those attendees who feel they can't leave when they're ready to because they don't want to be the first ones to leave the table.

"These are all global trends," Cooper stresses. "We have over 400 conference venues in 22 coun-

tries, and we're seeing these all the way through Asia, Europe and the Americas. Food and beverage trends are key. They're very important."

### Creativity Counts

"One of the biggest, longest-standing trends I've been seeing in food and beverage is that clients want to have more of a creative element in their selection," explains Emily Boykin, CMP, meeting planner for Onyx Meetings and Events in Overland Park, Kansas. "They really want to wow their guests with the latest and greatest, unique ideas. Thanks to sources like Pinterest, clients are really pushing the boundaries on food and making chefs break away from their standard menus and embrace the opportunity to show off. I would often show clients a basic

menu as a drawing board, more or less, and work with them and the chef to create their ideal display/option instead of forcing them to pick from a normal, basic selection. You want each guest to have an authentic, memorable hospitality experience, and food and beverage is a great way to make that happen."

The very nature of trends means that they are guaranteed to change over time, and Boykin wonders what the next trend will be. "Talking with other planners, we are ready to find out what's coming. ...We survived the recent cupcake trend, are wading through the farm-to-table trend, and are really ready to see what clients come up with next."

C&IT



## 2016: The Year of 'Multiple Personalities' in F&B

The San Francisco-based hospitality and restaurant consulting firm Andrew Freeman & Co. has released its predictions for the hottest trends that will impact food and beverage in the coming year, which it has nicknamed "the year of multiple personalities." Here are a few of them:

- 🍷 **Go Veg or Go Home.** Vegetables will be the hero this year. They'll be more than a side dish because people want less animal protein, and they'll expect their veggies to be ramped up.
- 🍷 **Happy in Hawaii, Wish You Were Here.** Hawaiian food will be the latest New American food to secure a place in the spotlight, and menus may feature such delicacies as grilled Spam and poke (raw fish) rice bowls.
- 🍷 **A Landslide of Sliders.** Watch for everything from beer-battered cod to Moroccan spiced pork to gravy meatball sliders.
- 🍷 **Pillow Talk.** This one refers to those little pillows of deliciousness such as samosas, empanadas, dumplings and blintzes.
- 🍷 **Between the Sweets.** Watch for gourmet or build-your-own varieties of ice cream sandwiches that go beyond those you loved as a kid.
- 🍷 **Fried Chicken Flies the Coop.** This trend is for those times when nothing but comfort food will do, whether it's made using a traditional recipe or amped up with a spicy ethnic twist.
- 🍷 **Are You Mocking Me?** Mocktails that incorporate a creative blend of ingredients will offer a refreshing option for non-drinkers, those watching their diets, designated drivers and pregnant women.
- 🍷 **The Bubble Bursts.** Bubbles will expand their repertoire from champagne and sparkling wine to fancy house-made sodas.
- 🍷 **The Return of the Tiki Cocktail.** And yes, the little paper umbrellas are making a comeback, too.
- 🍷 **Cocktails by the Course.** Some bartenders will be pairing cocktails with multicourse dinners to put a new spin on the concept of wine-paired dinners.

— KB



# Destination

Credit: Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa



## From Luxury Resorts to Old Florida Outposts

High-end to high touch: Overlooking the Atlantic at Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa on the island of Palm Beach; and communing with manatees in the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, accessible through snorkel tours at Plantation on Crystal River.

## The Florida Experience



Credit: Plantation on Crystal River

Florida meets the needs of corporate and incentive planners with an appealing mix of sophisticated cities, coastal towns, white-sand beaches, marquee entertainment, theme parks, international culture, and expansive natural areas of lush vegetation and wildlife. Who, after all, doesn't want to see alligators, dolphins and manatees by day and enjoy stellar restaurants and entertainment venues by night?

Here are diverse areas to consider, plus statewide news on hotels and cities.

### Palm Beach County

A haven for the well-heeled for more than a century, Palm Beach County on the Atlantic Coast is an excellent choice for upscale incentive meetings and groups composed of C-suite executives. Elizabeth Loftus, business development manager for Luxury Trips, a team of private travel designers, brought just such a group — 27 participants in Vistage Florida's annual retreat — to Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa in October.

"Vistage Florida is an invitation-only group. All of the members are CEOs and business owners who have very busy schedules and limited time," Loftus says. "They wanted to get out of Central Florida but only had three days. I needed a destination that was close enough to accommodate the

time constraints but unique enough to give them a relaxing, memorable vacation.

"Palm Beach is a beautiful location. It is known for its award-winning hotels with pristine beaches and coastline, which was what we wanted for the retreat. It's only a three-hour drive from Central Florida, the ideal travel time for these busy executives."

The group has previously stayed at The Breakers, one of the county's classic resorts, but this year, Eau Palm attracted Loftus' attention.

"I contacted several hotels in the area, but the Eau Palm stood out for many different reasons, especially given its recognition in *Travel & Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler* magazines," she says. "The guests were looking for a luxury resort stay that would appeal to the adults as well as the children they were bringing along. It offered a secluded resort atmosphere but was close enough for the guests to experience other parts of West Palm if they desired."

Because this was a retreat with a focus on annual planning, the group spent most of their time on-property. In addition to meetings, they also enjoyed "the all-immersive vacation aspect of Eau Palm." Loftus notes that a meeting highlight was motivational speaker Gene Griessman, who shared insights on leadership.

The resort staff stood out as well. "Carrie Zimmerman was my executive meeting manager, and she was incredible! She was prompt, knowledgeable and willing to do whatever we needed to make sure the event was a success and the guests were well taken care of, including making sure that gifts and amenities were delivered appropriately."

Loftus liked that the spacious meeting room was light-filled and overlooked the pool, and that the feel of the resort changed from day to evening. "During the day, the lobby portrayed a beautiful Palm Beach chic style, and at night purple up-lights created a sophisticated change in ambience. The resort's strong attention to detail was impeccable."

The group also stayed on-property for the majority of meals with great success. "Eau Palm put together the best menu and catered to the various requests of the group," Loftus says. "Each location provided a refreshing new environment. When weather affected one dinner, they quickly moved it to an indoor location that was just as beautiful as the original outside venue. The room rental was waived as long as we met our food and beverage minimum. This played a large part in selecting the Eau because many of the other properties we considered were more expensive for meals and meetings."

In the final analysis, Loftus says, "The Eau Palm made planning seamless." She appreciated that the resort made



*"Palm Beach is a beautiful location...known for its award-winning hotels with pristine beaches."*

**Elizabeth Loftus**  
Business Development Manager  
Luxury Trips, Winter Park, FL

hospitality rooms available to guests for the afternoon after checkout, and she liked the many outside venues available for evening functions — some with cozy fire pits — as well as the city nightlife nearby.

On the last evening, the group went off-property for dinner. "I researched several locations and finally settled on Café L'Europe in Palm Beach," Loftus says, adding that the restaurant created a custom menu that was printed with the Vistage and Luxury Trips logos. "The food was spectacular," she says, "and the private dining room was well-appointed — exactly what the members were looking for."

### More Palm Beach County News

Downtown West Palm soon will be transformed by the addition of the 12-story, 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach,

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Credit: Hilton West Palm Beach

Rendering of the Hilton West Palm Beach, which opens this month.

scheduled to open January 27, 2016. The hotel, which is connected to the 350,000-sf Palm Beach County Convention Center by an enclosed walkway, will offer two ballrooms and eight conference rooms, as well as additional event space. It also will feature Manor, a 225-seat restaurant that will showcase the talents of renowned local chef Matthew Byrne of the acclaimed eatery Kitchen. The hotel will feature a lobby bar called Galley, a fitness center and a landscaped pool area with cabanas. The Hilton West Palm Beach is the final piece in the CityPlace master plan, which brought West Palm into a new age, offering a mix of more than 80 national stores, specialty shops, restaurants and entertainment venues. The Kravis Center for the Performing Arts is across the street, and nearby are the restaurants and nightlife of Clematis Street, the Intracoastal waterfront and the Norton Museum of Art.

In other news, Mandarin Oriental announced in November that Palm Beach County will get additional accommodations when the brand's luxury hotel and residences open in Boca Raton in 2017. Stay tuned...

## Miami

Miami, which announced a record-breaking increase in visitors from September 2014–August 2015, recently revealed details on Miami Beach Convention Center renovations, scheduled for completion in 2018. The center is being reimagined as a LEED-certified facility with more than 500,000 sf of exhibit space, a 60,000-sf ballroom and 81 new breakout rooms. The \$615 million investment already has resulted in notable future bookings. The renovation includes an adjacent 800-room art deco-inspired hotel. The Miami area also will add an additional 2,300 hotel rooms in the next year, including the new East Miami Hotel, scheduled to open in winter 2016. Future projects also include All Aboard Florida,

a \$2.5 billion privately run passenger train connecting Miami and Orlando, scheduled to receive passengers in 2017.

Less than an hour's drive south from Miami International Airport is Ocean Reef Club on 2,500 acres in Key Largo, the northernmost of the Florida Keys. Ocean Reef Club will unveil its long-awaited Carysfort Hall in February. The new space will be available to select groups for meetings, corporate retreats and conferences, plus teambuilding events, and cooking classes and demonstrations for up to 150 in the cooking school. The light-filled hall features a 5,607-sf ballroom, meeting rooms, breakout spaces and more, accommodating groups of 20 to 500.

## Orlando

Set in Central Florida, Orlando's 450-plus hotels and resorts, multiple theme parks and convention center with more than 2.1 million sf put it among the world's top meeting destinations, and it's hard to imagine anywhere with a better handle on how to create that elusive "wow" factor.

At Walt Disney World, big changes are underway in the Disney Springs area, formerly Downtown Disney. While theming and branding have changed, the majority of the area's hotels remain constant, including Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort, where Shawn Martin, corporate operations manager, brought 200 attendees for Boston-based HMR Weight Management Services Corp.'s annual initial training meeting. "We have been coming to this hotel for approximately 15 years," he says. "When we first contracted with the property, it was due to the size of the meeting space, affordability of the sleeping rooms compared to other area hotels and proximity to restaurants within walking distance.

"After our initial meeting, it was clear that the staff was willing to go above and beyond what we require for our events. The first meeting was so successful that we have continued to contract with this hotel over the years and have always achieved the same result — perfection."

Martin says the hotel easily meets the group's needs as a primary venue. "This facility has plenty of meeting space relative to its size. It is more than capable of holding our general session with three concurrent breakout sessions — all within the same floor so that the meeting planning staff doesn't have to run all over the property to manage the sessions."

It's the hotel staff, however, that stands out for Martin. "This property has extremely low staff turnover compared to other hotels. It's great for us because we know exactly what to expect from them, and I'm always amazed at the little details the staff remembers about the event from year to year. That certainly makes my job easier, and they are all a pleasure to work with. There are never any surprises. You won't find a better crew anywhere else in the area."

The location is also a plus. All that Disney offers is close by but not so close that it's distracting. "The great thing about this property," Martin says, "is that it is just enough removed from the major theme parks that attendees can focus on the work at hand, but close enough for them to enjoy those ven-



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Recently renovated Grand Suite at the Walt Disney World Swan Hotel in Orlando.

ues during downtime. We have had a few events in the Downtown Disney area, and it's perfect because the venues are all a short walk away."

Martin notes that Orlando works well because of ease of flights in and out, and because it's close to many of HMR's Florida clinics. "It's also a perfect spot to have fun and tack on vacation time when work is done," he says. "Orlando, in my opinion, is a perfect meeting destination. The weather is warm, people are friendly, and there are a ton of venues to hold an event. As far as this particular venue and Walt Disney World, how can it not be fun and successful when you are hanging out with Mickey and friends?"

Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort wrapped up a \$10 million renovation in November, giving guests two accommodation options: Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Disney Springs Resort Area and Wyndham Garden Lake Buena Vista Disney Springs Resort Area.

Another option here is Holiday Inn Orlando-Disney Springs, where 25 attendees gathered in October for the annual GE Meeting. Tracey Poole has only positive things to say about this hotel and staff.

"I spoke with Christine Burns," says Poole, who is a sales support coordinator. "Her willingness and wonderful demeanor let me know that she was not just selling the hotel and its amenities, but she really had a passion and was very confident about the services she could provide. She worked out a great room rate for my group. The conference rooms were oversized, very clean and presentation was wonderful. The service was

impeccable. I don't believe Christine had to manage the staff; they were just as willing to accommodate as she was. I didn't have to ask for anything as it was always there."

Poole has no hesitation recommending this property to other planners. "As you know, hotels are used every day. They can take a beating and the staff takes a beating. Not this hotel. It is always and I mean always clean, the staff is always warm and personable, and the chef is amazing. The chef is so willing to come out and ask if you enjoyed your meal and if there is something else you need or want. I could not ask for better. The stations they set up at my meetings were wonderful, from homemade pancake batter to the omelet station with all fresh meats and veggies — amazing, just amazing service!"

"It does not seem to be about the money or the amount you spend there," she adds. "Rather, it's a sincere warmth — you know they enjoy their jobs and enjoy seeing others enjoy themselves. They dot every i and cross every t, which allows you to worry about other things. It will be one of the easiest meetings,

and it's all attributed to a group of professional people who care about you."

Having a meeting on Disney property also has its benefits. "When you have a meeting in Disney," Poole says, "it's nice that you're able to work hard during the day and in the evening be so close to Disney Springs and all it offers. I was able to have the group walk out of the hotel to go to dinner. Convenience was key, and this made it very easy to get where we needed to go."

The GE group booked functions at Planet Hollywood and at Raglan Road, both in the Disney Springs area. Poole says Raglan was nice but the service slow although they had made a reservation. Planet Hollywood was a favorite — in spite of an initial mistake by the venue. "We had placed a deposit, and when the bill was presented we overlooked that the deposit was not taken off. I received a call from the manager who apologized that they had overcharged us and refunded the deposit immediately. Honesty goes a long way, plus the service was fantastic for a large group."

The success of any meeting often comes down to the people you work with, and Poole has high praise for Christine Burns and the Holiday Inn staff. "Call Christine," she says. "She's a planner's dream. This staff makes your life wonderful and your meeting memorable. I feel like they are family and enjoy every time I have the opportunity to speak, work and engage with them!"

## More Orlando News

The first-ever NBC Sports Grill & Brew opened at Universal Orlando Resort's CityWalk in October with great fanfare and a slew of NBC sports commentators in attendance. The restaurant features private dining spaces, nearly 100 HD screens so guests can be immersed in the sports experience no matter where they sit, an expansive menu of the best game-day food and more than 100 beer selections including craft and

regional brews and the restaurant's own proprietary 862 Orlando, a draft you can find only here.

Universal Orlando Resort and Loews Hotels & Resorts is building the Loews Sapphire Falls Resort. It will be the fifth onsite hotel at Universal Orlando Resort, featuring 1,000 rooms and suites with a casual Caribbean theme, built around a lagoon and towering waterfall. The resort is expected to open in the summer.

Also opening this summer is a new attraction at Universal's Islands of Adventure: "Skull Island: Reign of Kong," which will honor one of the most monumental figures in movie history, King Kong.

This month, the 1,470-room Hilton Orlando will unveil 8,909 sf of meeting space in eight new meeting rooms adjacent to the 14,900-sf Florida Ballroom. Two of the rooms, providing 4,764 and 4,145 sf respectively, also will offer prefunction space, a registration desk and office. The hotel's other two existing ballrooms offer 50,000 sf and 30,000 sf of space.

Located within the Walt Disney World Resort, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel recently redesigned every guest room in the 758-room Swan hotel, with the same effort planned for the 1,509-room Dolphin hotel. The Swan and Dolphin's meeting and convention space is now equipped with the latest advancements in high-density Wi-Fi technology. The install, which was completed in October, will be the largest of its kind in Orlando.

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*“Orlando, in my opinion, is a perfect meeting destination. The weather is warm, people are friendly and there are a ton of venues to hold an event.”*

Shawn Martin, Corporate Operations Manager  
HMR Weight Management Services Corp., Boston, MA



The Swan and Dolphin property offers a huge variety of meeting options with more than 329,000 sf of combined meeting space. Some 84 meeting rooms include executive boardrooms and a number of ballroom configurations. One totals 55,000 sf divisible into 16 meeting rooms, and another 34,000 sf is divisible into 11 meeting rooms. Convention and exhibit space tops 110,000 sf, and 99,000 sf of outdoor space includes a number of terraces and courtyards. The hotel also offers some truly nontraditional event spaces. Dinners, receptions and other group events can be held in areas including banquet kitchens, back hallways and even a giant freezer. With the latter, up to 60 guests may enjoy unusual offerings such as a martini bar served on carved ice, or a raw bar and caviar also served on ice — all while outfitted in parkas provided by the hotel.

#### Daytona Beach

On Florida's north-central Atlantic Coast, The Shores Resort and Spa in Daytona Beach Shores completed a property-

wide renovation in 2014 encompassing the 212 guest rooms and 20,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space. Event facilities include a 6,800-sf grand ballroom that can be subdivided into five smaller meeting facilities ranging from 830 sf to 3,700 sf. Guests using this ground-level facility find themselves walking through the Daytona Beach Stock Car Racing Hall of Fame featuring plaques of famous faces in racing. Also available are boardrooms

and smaller meeting rooms plus more than 8,000 sf of rooftop “cloud level” meeting facilities with floor-to-ceiling glass for outstanding views.

Daytona's multifaceted Ocean Center convention center features 32 meeting rooms, an executive boardroom and VIP suite and 32,000 sf of total meeting space. A large ballroom offers divisible space, and the facility also includes a 94,000-sf exhibit hall and 42,000-sf arena that seats 9,300. Located 400 feet from the ocean, the center is flanked by a selection of shops and restaurants.

It just got easier to get to Daytona Beach. In January, Jet-Blue will begin daily nonstop service from New York's JFK International Airport. Also new to Daytona is the Cici and Hyatt Brown Museum of Art, opening in February with the most extensive collection of Florida art in the world.

#### Jacksonville Area

Downtown Jacksonville's premier meeting hotel is the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront — the self-proclaimed largest



Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront offers “Recharge Your Meetings,” a new menu of healthful meeting breaks, including yoga, stretch/planking breaks and Zumba instruction on the outdoor terraces on the riverfront.

Credit: Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront



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The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa recently updated its 40,000 sf of meeting space.

convention hotel between Orlando and Atlanta. It offers 951 newly renovated guest rooms and more than 116,000 sf of function space, including 30 meeting rooms, most of which overlook the St. Johns River. Facilities include a 28,000-sf Grand Ballroom and more than 21,000 sf of outdoor riverfront decks, eight conference suites and space for small meetings. The hotel recently began offering "Recharge Your Meetings," a new menu of healthful meeting breaks, which include yoga, stretch/planking breaks and Zumba instruction on the outdoor terraces on the riverfront; coordinated fitness instruction in the rooftop fitness center with panoramic city and river views; healthful F&B options, such as the chef's smoothie bar, healthful snacks or energizing beverages.

Twenty-nine miles north of the Jacksonville airport is the oceanfront Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, which now boasts 80,000 sf of meeting space, including a new 16,825-sf ballroom. The spacious conference center houses more than 13,000 sf of prefunction space as well as an 11,000-sf event lawn. The 404 oceanfront guest rooms include 27 suites.

Twenty miles southeast of Jacksonville is the AAA Five Diamond Ponte Vedra Inn & Club, a 300-acre resort in operation since 1928. Its luxury accommodations include 250 rooms and suites. Guests can enjoy top-quality golf and tennis programs as well as a spa. The resort has 25,000 sf of meeting and banquet space and 17 meeting rooms, the largest of which is just over 6,200 sf. The resort recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of its Peyton House accommodations and oceanfront Surf Club, while also introducing the new Tavern Lounge and upgrading the complimentary Wi-Fi system property-wide. The resort will complete a multimillion-dollar renovation of its Ocean House accommodations in fall 2017.

Sister property Ponte Vedra Lodge & Club has completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of its 66 oceanfront guest rooms.

### Destin

Located in Northwest Florida's Panhandle, the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa promotes itself as Northwest Florida's largest full-service beachfront resort hotel. It offers 602 guest rooms as well as 40,000 sf of recently renovated meeting space designed to handle groups ranging from 10 to 2,000. A third ballroom — the Coastal Ballroom — was added last March. The new 7,500-sf addition included expansion to prefunction space, restroom facilities and permanent registration areas. The additional space provides meeting planners with more than 23,000 sf of ballroom and event space on a single level, with approximately 10,000 sf of additional prefunction area to support the three ballrooms. With nearly 40,000 sf of indoor meeting space and 20,000 sf of outdoor event space, the resort can now accommodate larger conferences and events and provide additional flexibility for group activities and breakouts.

The three-story Sandestin Welcome Center opened in December 2014 at Sandestin Beach & Golf Resort. Of interest to planners is Overlook at Sandestin, an L-shaped balcony at the top of the center offering private event space, a gazebo area and sweeping views of Choctawhatchee Bay, the marina and Grand Sandestin hotel.

### Sanibel/Captiva

Across the causeway from Fort Myers on Florida's Southwest Gulf Coast, lie the barrier islands Sanibel and Captiva,

which beautifully capture the easygoing tropical island ambience of old Florida at its natural best. Sanibel and sister island Captiva are renowned for their shelling beaches (15 miles of them) where 250 different types of seashells are waiting to be found. For attendees who could use a little more laidback and lot less stress, here are a few great options.

South Seas Island Resort occupies 330 acres on the northern tip of Captiva Island, boasting an exclusive 2.5 miles of white sand beaches. Offering a variety of spacious accommodations, including 471 guest rooms, condominiums and waterfront private homes, the resort functions equally well for group meetings, incentive getaways or executive retreats. More than 45,000 sf of meeting space includes multiple meeting and breakout rooms, many of which feature Gulf or harbor views; and outdoor settings from beach to bay offer event space for receptions and networking.

The lure of watersports is everywhere at the resort, which has a full-service yacht harbor and marina where planners can charter Captiva Cruises for private group outings. Home to the Colgate Offshore Sailing School, South Seas also offers competitive regatta corporate teambuilding programs. For attendees on their free time, there are rental boats, paddleboards, waverunners, kayaks, fishing charters, dolphin and wildlife adventure excursions, parasailing...the watersports list goes on. For golfers in the group, even the nine-hole, par 27 executive



**"We chose the Plantation on Crystal River for all the activities available plus the affordability and the great reviews."**

**Tammy Alverson**, Controller  
Atex Distributing/AccuAir Inc., Apopka, FL

Captiva Course is beachfront along the Gulf of Mexico. Also onsite is The Blackwood Tennis Academy and Kay Casperson Spa. South Seas Island Resort offers numerous dining outlets as well as a sustainable seafood program for catering services with personalized menus featuring locally caught seafood and fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs sourced from the executive chef's onsite garden. Within walking distance of the resort is a shopping village and "downtown" Captiva, home of the famously quirky and delightful Bubble Room, a restaurant with a playful mix of décor in five dining rooms on three floors. Private group options, even for large groups, are available.

Located on Sanibel Island is the re-designed Sundial Beach Resort & Spa. The resort recently invested more than \$6 million in refreshed amenities and offers unique outdoor event space with water views. The new Resort Centre, which is the



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South Seas Island Resort occupies 330 acres on the northern tip of Captiva Island, including 2.5 miles of white sand beaches.

largest meeting venue on Sanibel Island, boasts 12,000 sf of flexible space that accommodates up to 300 guests.

### Crystal River

Just as laidback and authentically old Florida is the community of Crystal River, 75 miles north of Tampa on the Gulf Coast. Crystal River is the winter home of endangered Florida manatees, the ubiquitous, slow-moving residents of the area's namesake river. Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge is the only refuge created specifically to protect these gentle giants and offers visitors a chance to observe them from above and below the water.

Tammy Alverson, controller for Atex Distributing/Accu-Air Inc., arranged the company's quarterly employee outing in November for 35 participants. The event is usually a dinner; however, this year the company wanted to make it special by arranging a weekend retreat set at Plantation on Crystal River.

"I searched venues from the east coast of Florida to the south and each search kept coming back to the Plantation," Alverson says. "We were looking for a location that would be central for everyone while providing activities that all could enjoy. Since our group is so diverse, the options of golf, fishing, boating, spa appointments, swimming, etc., were very important. I had also received pricing from two other resorts and the Plantation was the most affordable. We chose Plantation on Crystal River for all the activities available plus the affordability and the great reviews we found on the Internet."

Because this event focused on rest and relaxation, the

weekend included lots of activities. "Our event planner, Carrie Hartman, was extraordinary in helping us plan our events, down to the competition games we played on Saturday," Alverson says. "She was always responsive and eager to offer suggestions. Spa Blu's manager, Tracy, and staff were amazing to accommodate everyone's appointments. All of the resort staff from the restaurant to the adventure center to tour captains were friendly and helpful."

Among the group activities were a sunset river cruise followed by trolley transportation to a local restaurant Friday evening. Alverson says the trolley ride was fun but would have been better in daylight and better for a slightly smaller group as there were not enough seats for everyone. On Saturday evening, the group dined at the resort. "Dinner was excellent, well presented and the room was spacious enough for our group to comfortably socialize and enjoy the delicious food."

In retrospect, Alverson says she probably should not have booked a group breakfast buffet. "The resort has a very nice weekend breakfast buffet so we should have just let folks take advantage of that. This is no fault of the resort; just my poor planning."

All in all, the weekend was a success and Alverson recommends it to others. "Our rooms were all close together, nothing was too far of a walk, moving about the grounds was very easy," she says. The group also took part in all of the activities available except golf, making the resort an excellent choice.

Florida's natural serenity, however, was the true standout. Looking back, Alverson says that the most memorable element of all was "the beauty and quietness of the river." **C&IT**



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## Nevada Where Exotic Adventures Rev Up the WOW Factor



Billy Ford, S.V.P., Kemira Chemicals Inc., takes his Pinnacle Award winners to Las Vegas' Exotics Racing where they drive supercars at triple-digit speeds and then has Maverick Aviation copters swoop in to take them for a trip to the Grand Canyon for a WOW incentive.

By Christine Loomis

Nevada is more than Las Vegas. Even Las Vegas is more than Las Vegas — at least more than the perception of Las Vegas held by much of the public and seeded by the city itself with its racy ad campaigns. Ironically, few cities in the world are more serious about meetings and conventions than Las Vegas or able to match Las Vegas in terms of the quality, depth and value of its meeting experience.

Still, it's not the only game in town. Nevada also has the Reno-Tahoe combo, with the soaring Sierra Nevada as backdrop to Reno's skyline, and Lake Tahoe, which straddles the California-Nevada border and plunges to depths of 1,644 feet below its piercing blue surface, as a conference add-on. Between these two cities are enough options to bring groups back to the Silver State for years to come.

### Reno-Tahoe

When Amy Alley, director of events for Dynamic Communities Inc. in Tampa, Florida, considers what makes Reno

an easy sell, it's the whole package — hotels, CVB, pricing and community. Dynamic Communities' User Group Summit took place there in October, drawing 4,000 attendees. The group was based at Atlantis Casino Resort Spa and Peppermill Resort Spa Casino, both near the Reno-Sparks Convention Center.

"Reno is a good fit for us because of the pricing, relationships we built with the CVB and hotel partners, functionality of the space to fit our program and the culture of the area," Alley says. "It's not too big, not too small a feel and a grassroots community much like our organization. Our program was primarily held at the convention center and Atlantis and Peppermill. Several of our sponsors held receptions and events outside of the hotels. One sponsor held an event at the Edge at Peppermill, and it was a huge win."

With such a large group, Alley was proactive about flights. "The main challenge facing attendees was flight accessibility," she says. "We listed the top airlines flying into Reno on

our websites and communicated with the CVB to inform the airport of our large group. Some attendees had to stay an extra night or leave a day early, but most people were accommodated in their travels."

When it comes to what made the biggest difference in successfully planning this event, Alley points to the people. "Our sales teams at the CVB and hotels went above and beyond to showcase what the city has to offer. Their customer service and their genuine care for our team and our program led us to do business in Reno. We were really impressed with the facilities at both hotels, as well as their willingness to make our program a success."

"At Atlantis, John Carter was our primary contact and was always on hand, from the beginning of the sales process to onsite at event execution. John is a true professional. At Peppermill, Nat Carasali and Pat Flynn were there to welcome me from the first site visit. Not every owner of a luxury resort takes the time to show planners the meeting space and guest rooms! Nat has a humble manner but a great sense of pride that beams through."

Also a standout was Alison Farr, who changed jobs during the planning process but didn't miss a beat. "Alison Farr is largely the reason we chose Reno for our Summit," Alley says. "At the time, she was with the CVB and then moved to the sales team at Peppermill and continued the same pleasurable level of service to our group, going out of her way to make sure we had everything we needed. John Leinen with the CVB continued our great relationship there, assisting us greatly along the way."

With such a large group, logistics were critical. "We provided our attendees' shuttle service from the Peppermill to the convention center, and I believe that's a must if leveraging both venues for a program," Alley says. "We used Atlantis for one program's breakout sessions and ran 17 breakouts consecutively there. The walk across the skybridge was relatively easy and accessible to the convention center, but to ease the flow, we planned the agenda around the least number of times attendees would have to move around."

Alley says the Peppermill team did an excellent job with catering and that the venue sells itself. "The ambience and décor of our reception locations provided just the right atmosphere," she adds.

Some attendees also took advantage of Reno's proximity to Lake Tahoe through a group rate Alley was able to offer at the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort. "I personally enjoyed Tahoe during our site visits and believe that is a great asset for Reno to offer," she says. "I'd encourage groups to plan more outings there if possible for their programs."

With 4,000 attendees, Alley says it was a large group for Reno — with a lot of expectations. Yet the meeting was a great success with few negative issues. "Overall, I believe the relationships and customer service carried us through a great planning process," she says. "We had some challenges with Internet bandwidth at the convention center as our group

requires a lot of service. We started planning early, but I wish we would have had better contingency planning for onsite."

Alley doesn't hesitate to recommend Reno. "Reach out to John Leinen at the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority (aka Johnny Reno — just ask him), Alison Farr at Peppermill and John Carter at Atlantis. You'll be well taken care of. Everyone works as a team, a huge benefit to planners."

"Oh, and one more thing: At the Reno-Sparks Convention Center, don't miss out on the grilled donut stations for your reception — a big hit!"

### Las Vegas

Billy Ford, senior vice president with Atlanta-based Kemira Chemicals Inc., brought approximately 200 attendees to Kemira's annual sales and marketing meeting at M Resort in April 2015, which was not the group's first Las Vegas meeting.

"We selected Las Vegas six years ago and haven't considered another location since. Despite the fact that we are a team of



*"Everyone loves the energy and excitement of Vegas. That energy permeates the team, and we leave Vegas energized and ready not only to work but also to win."*

Billy Ford, Senior Vice President  
Kemira Chemicals Inc., Atlanta, GA

200-plus conservative engineers functioning as technical sales representatives, everyone loves the energy and excitement of Vegas. That energy permeates the team, and we leave Vegas energized and ready not only to work but also to win. While a motivated and energized sales force is priceless, it is also helpful that I can clearly document the cost advantage and ease of access Vegas provides, making our selection of Vegas the clear, right choice.

"Before anyone could challenge the selection of Vegas, I solicited quotes from multiple cities. We priced airline flights from around the country to each of those destinations. Vegas has consistently been the lowest total cost option, making it impossible for anyone to challenge the selection of Vegas as our destination."

Kemira has hosted its meeting at M Resort for multiple years, which Ford says has made the planning process easy. "We initially selected The M because of the focus on service and quality, which matches our company culture. We have continued to choose The M because we have developed a true partnership based on trust. Our management teams have come to know each other, and it really has been as simple as saying 'Hey, we want to do the same thing again this year,' which has made the planning simple. We've never had to utilize an external event management team to make the meeting a smooth, flow-





New Year's Eve 2015 at the High Roller at the Linq by Caesars Entertainment.

ing success because we haven't had to reinvent the wheel each year. We make tweaks, but we do so seamlessly with the help of the team at The M. We have also developed a great working relationship with the LVCVA who help us select and connect with service providers like transportation, entertainment and offsite teambuilding venues. With the help of The M and the LVCVA, we show up and the meeting just works."

Ford says everything about M Resort stands out, from the service on arrival to the housekeeping and food. But two venues are favorites. "We particularly love the Hostile Grape wine cellar for our opening session. If you haven't seen it you should. It's 'technology-meets-wine' in a high-class environment. We also love the central bar area where we network after dinner. Our team doesn't get spread out like it might at a mega casino, allowing us to maximize networking potential."

Also excellent, Ford says, is the ease of access between guest rooms and meeting space. "The main elevators take our people directly from their rooms to the convention level. From there, the primary ballroom and breakout rooms are only steps away. We've never 'lost' anyone!"

The hotel is the setting for one of the most important evenings of the event, the Pinnacle Award Ceremony, held on the second night. "The white table linens, outstanding surf-and-turf dinner, stage lighting and attention to service all set the right climate for this coat-and-tie dinner," Ford says. "It's the pinnacle of our year when we get to recognize our top performers in front of their peers in such a powerful setting."

The group also has time to get out in the city. "We gen-

erally have a free night for the meeting participants to enjoy Vegas. It's great to see people teaming up with colleagues they don't work with on a daily basis for dinner and a show or dinner and sight-seeing on The Strip," Ford notes. "One of the most exciting activities is a combined supercar and helicopter program we developed with Exotics Racing and Maverick Aviation. We take our Pinnacle Award winners to Exotics Racing where they drive supercars on a track at triple-digit speeds. When the Maverick Aviation copters swoop in to pick them up for a trip to the Grand Canyon, it becomes tangibly clear that the effort invested to become a Pinnacle Award winner is recognized and appreciated."

In the end, Las Vegas perfectly meets the needs of this group of engineers, proving that the reality of the city often differs from the perception. "Don't be afraid to select Vegas," Ford says. "The cost advantages are clear and easy to quantify. Be confident in your culture, the maturity of your team and your ability to manage both. Being in Vegas doesn't mean you will wake up with a tattoo on your face. It does, however, mean you will leave energized and with the drive to do what it takes to be successful so you can come back!"

#### Variety of Choices Attracts Groups

Karen Hurlbut, owner of Muskego, Wisconsin-based Hurlbut Travel, plans multiple meetings in Las Vegas for Cramer and Associates, a consulting company providing sales, marketing and leadership programs for broker/dealers. In 2015, Hurlbut organized five Las Vegas meetings for the company, all held at various MGM properties including Aria, Mirage and Mandalay Bay.

"My client chooses Las Vegas for multiple meetings due to

Wynn Las Vegas.



Credit: Wynn Las Vegas



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***“My client chooses Las Vegas for multiple meetings due to the ease of access, price and the culture of the area. He enjoys the variety of dining options as well.”***



**Karen Hurlbut, Owner**  
Hurlbut Travel, Muskego, WI

the ease of access, price and the culture of the area,” Hurlbut says. “He enjoys the variety of dining options as well. The only real challenges with Las Vegas is trying to find rooms during conventions and the length of flights for my travelers from the East Coast.”

In terms of hotel choices, Cramer & Associates wants top-notch venues. “We love to host our events at hotels where attendees will find a wow factor,” Hurlbut says. “We work closely with the sales and catering staff at each hotel, and they can either make or break your experience. The rooms have to be great, the food has to be excellent and the service has to be exceptional.

“The Mirage is the most compact, so the ease for the attendees is great. Aria and Mandalay Bay have wonderful convention space but are a great distance from the sleeping rooms, which can cause challenges for people with mobility issues.”

One issue for Hurlbut is MGM’s pricing for the different hotels. “The thing that surprised me most was the fluctuation of costs from one MGM resort to another,” she says. “Mandalay

Bay was much more expensive in food and beverage costs compared to the Aria. Being that they are both MGM resorts and of the same caliber, I found that frustrating.”

Like Ford, Hurlbut says Las Vegas has a lot going for it. “It’s a fun location for all of the attendees. After the meetings, it’s a great venue for networking around the pools and for the casinos and multitude of activities that make Las Vegas famous.”

That’s important for this group because attendees are typically on their own in the evenings after meetings and group dinners.

Because of the city’s popularity, Hurlbut says it’s important to begin the planning process early. “The most important part of the planning process is to start as early as possible and find availability at multiple hotels of the same quality, which gives you the most negotiating power,” she says. “If there are 10 hotels that want your business, it’s easier to get the best deal.”

### **New and Noteworthy in Las Vegas**

As the 50th Golden Anniversary of **Caesars Palace** approaches, the evolution continues with the reimagining of the iconic hotel’s original tower, the Roman Tower, to be completely reborn as the new Julius Tower. Expected to welcome its first guests January 1, 2016, the new 587-room tower will feature new design-savvy, modern rooms and suites.

The guest room amenities will include 55-inch TVs equipped with Sonifi system, luxurious Beauty Rest Bouvet Island Mattresses, a specially curated mini bar and English-themed Gilchrist & Soames in-room toiletries and amenities.

**Encore Resort and Encore Tower Suites at Wynn Las**



The outdoor plaza along the frontage of New York-New York includes Stupidiotic, Swatch and I Love NYNY shops, and restaurants such as Shake Shack and Tom’s Urban. A stage at one end of the Brooklyn Bridge showcases live bands and other entertainment.

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**Vegas** began a refresh in summer 2015, including updated furnishings, floor coverings, technology, aesthetics and custom bed linens. Also of note is that the Wynn Fairway Villas and Encore three-bedroom duplex are now available for guests to rent. The 5,829-sf Encore duplex features a billiard room and private massage and exercise room with floor-to-ceiling views of the city. The dining area seats 16. The Fairway Villas overlook Wynn Golf Course and include a private massage room, workspace with complimentary high-speed Internet access, a breakfast room and seating for eight.

The Buffet at Wynn Las Vegas has unveiled the restaurant's new concept, which elevates the traditional buffet to that of a more sophisticated dining experience.

New at **Delano Las Vegas** in 2015 was the Delano Beach Club, a South Beach-inspired experience with 16 private cabanas and the availability of buying out the entire beach club in the evening for up to 350 attendees. In July, Delano also welcomed guests to its newly renovated guest rooms, the final phase of a resort-wide refresh.

Rivea and Skyfall Lounge, by Michelin-decorated chef Alain Ducasse, are now open and located on the 64th floor of Delano Las Vegas.

Rivea: Influenced by the delectable food markets of Provence and Italy, the menu focuses on simple, fresh Mediterranean flavors made with the best West Coast-sourced seasonal ingredients. The restaurant's 50-seat private dining room Rivea+ boasts 180-degree views of The Strip through floor-to-ceiling windows.

Skyfall Lounge: Located adjacent to Rivea, Skyfall Lounge offers an evolving nightlife experience that builds in tempo as the evening progresses.

The **Monte Carlo** and **New York-New York Hotel & Casino** revitalization will lead visitors to **The Park** and the new world-class 20,000-seat **Las Vegas Arena**, both of which are slated to open in April 2016. The Park will create an immersive outdoor destination spanning more than eight acres, re-envisioning the traditional pedestrian experience in Las Vegas.

Tom's Urban, a modern and casual dining concept, is now open and serving breakfast, lunch, dinner and late night at New York-New York. Located on the casino floor and adjacent to the resort's replica Brooklyn Bridge, the venue features a contemporary dining experience offering innovative, yet fa-



Carbone, the new dining experience at Aria Resort & Casino, is fashioned after the Italian-American restaurants of the mid-20th century, featuring captains and tableside service.

Credit: Douglas Friedman

miliar dishes coupled with a creative bar program.

The AAA Five Diamond **Aria Resort & Casino** announced a major expansion of its LEED Gold-certified convention center as well as enhancements to the existing convention center and event space at Crystals, and two new restaurants. The \$154 million project will deliver an additional 200,000 sf of technologically advanced, flexible meeting space across four stories, highlighted by indoor/open-air spaces and a glass-enclosed venue with views of The Park and new Las Vegas Arena. With anticipated completion in February 2018, Aria will feature more than 500,000 sf of meeting space.

The first level will feature

an open ballroom with ample prefunction spaces, and access to an exclusive loading dock for events that require sizable displays. Versatile indoor-outdoor breakout rooms will highlight the second level, while the third level will offer a large ballroom as well as naturally lit prefunction spaces connecting to Aria's existing convention center. The facility's top floor is set to become one of Las Vegas' most unique meeting venues as it complements a vast ballroom with a striking outdoor patio that can accommodate receptions for up to 2,000 guests. The top-floor patio will feature views overlooking The Park and Las Vegas Arena.

New media walls, high-tech furnishings, charging stations and a new registration area are among the elements added to the current convention center. Adjacent to Aria, The Shops at Crystals now offer 13,000 sf of multilevel, flexible space accommodating up to 980. The event space overlooks Aria's colorful dancing waters of Lumia and the Focus Water Wall. New Italian restaurant Carbone opened in October while indoor-outdoor Herringbone, featuring its take on California coastal cuisine, opened in late December.

**Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino** opened the Convention Center's 350,000-sf expansion. The \$70 million expansion includes new exhibit space, a 20,000-sf foyer and underground parking. The final phase of the expansion will transition existing space into a 70,000-sf carpeted Oceanside Ballroom this month. The Mandalay Bay Convention Center boasts more than 2 million total sf and more than 900,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space, which elevates its ranking in North America to No. 5 in both total square feet and exhibit space.

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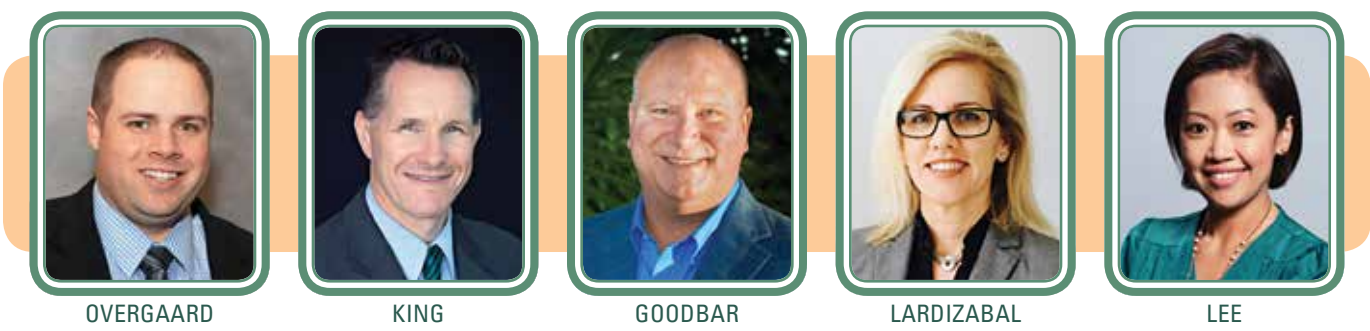
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# On The Move



The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has appointed **Jeffrey Overgaard** as sales manager for group sales at the resort's Wilderness Experience Properties. He previously was group sales manager at Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs.

AMResorts has promoted **Colette Baruth** to senior vice president of marketing, sales, revenue management and distribution. She was vice president of sales, marketing, revenue management and distribution.

Hyatt Regency Dallas has appointed **Bryan King** as director of sales and marketing. He most recently served as the

director of sales and marketing for the Hyatt Regency St. Louis at the Arch.

The Westin Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has named **Deanna Sylvestri** as director of group sales. She was a senior sales manager at Galleryone Fort Lauderdale - a DoubleTree Guest Suites.

**David Wahba** was appointed as director of sales for the Waldorf Astoria Orlando and Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek properties in Orlando, Florida. He most recently served as senior director for the Wyndham Hotel Group.

Benchmark Hospitality International has named **Perry Goodbar**

as director of sales and marketing for the Villas of Grand Cypress in Orlando, Florida. He was vice president of sales, services and business development for the Colonial Williamsburg Company.

**Michelle Lardizabal** was appointed as vice president of sales for Club Med. She was vice president of sales for City Wonders, a European guided tour company.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, has named **Isa Lee** as account director responsible for the Southeast market. She previously was senior sales manager at the Hilton Orlando. **C&IT**

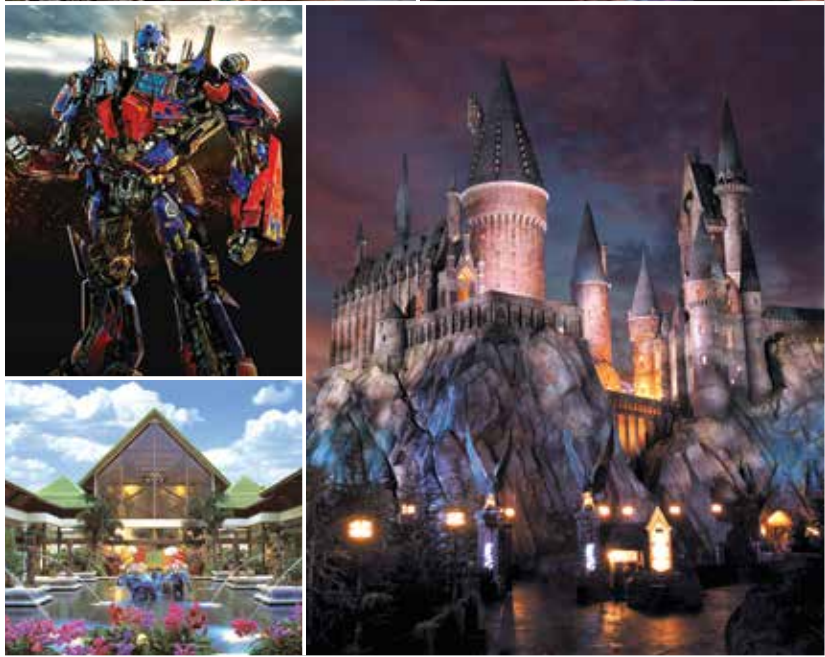
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