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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

California

The Golden State's Diversity of
Destinations Shines

PAGE 48

Visit Anaheim President
and CEO Jay Burress.

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Ship vs. Shore

All-Inclusive Perks, Plus New Technology,
New Dining & New Experiences Bring
Incentive Groups On Board

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TODAY'S AGENDA

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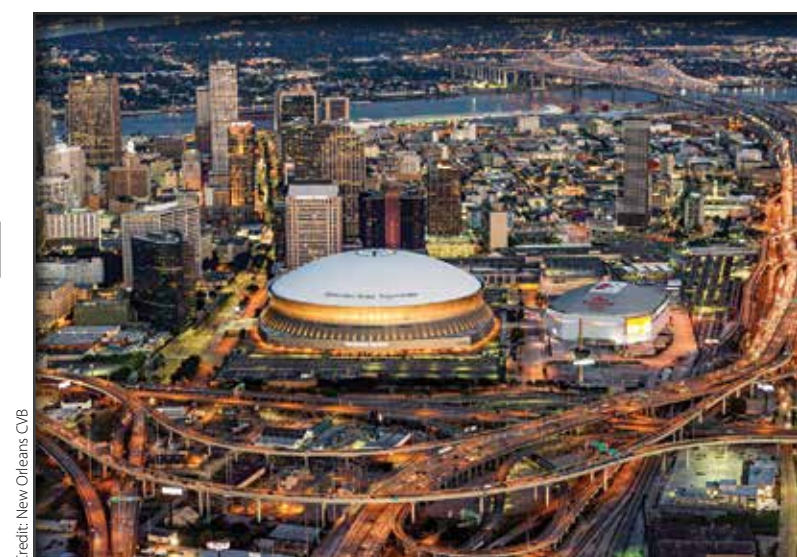
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Atlantic City's iconic Boardwalk Hall — a multiuse venue and home to the Miss America Pageant. **PAGE 40**

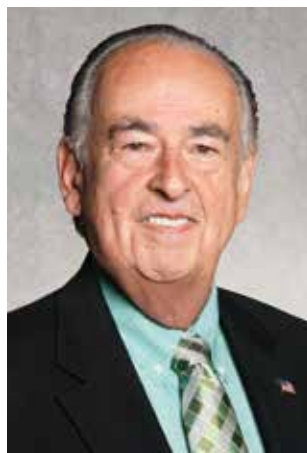


An aerial view of the New Orleans skyline. **PAGE 60**

Publisher's Message

Planners' Dream Destinations Growing

For the last several months, popular meeting and incentive destinations from coast to coast have touted their record-breaking numbers in visitation volume and spending. And the future looks bright as many industry leaders suggest the new president will improve the general business climate. U.S. Travel Association President and CEO Roger Dow said in a statement dated January 20, "President Trump emphasized a number of issues for which the American travel community shares his enthusiasm: infrastructure, domestic jobs and the U.S. trade balance. As it happens, all of our longstanding policy priorities align perfectly with that agenda." Time will tell.



What does matter most is that key destinations are keeping pace with the demand for meetings, and we outline four of them in this issue to aid in your planning for the future.

First up is California (page 48), which features Jay Burriss on the cover. Burriss, the dynamic president and CEO of Visit Anaheim, is a solid success story in his own right. Installed as the new leader of Visit Anaheim in 2013, Burriss has accomplished a great deal in a very short time such as the upcoming Anaheim Convention Center expansion, which adds 200,000 sf of flexible space. Burriss says, "Planners can build any experience within this space, from large galas and presentations to small educational breakout sessions. It's really a blank slate to create any customized event." Pure music to a meeting professional's ears. Other popular locales featured include Irvine, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Marina del Rey and San Diego.

Next, we're off to Atlantic City (page 40). Jennifer Morganti, a senior manager at U.S. Foods, says, "Atlantic City has everything that a meeting planner would need for resources. There is great variety and availability of space, hotel rooms and activities that will fit any event type with any budget."

Our Colorado feature (page 54) profiles Denver, which has generated record tourism numbers for the past decade, as well as Boulder, Colorado Springs and more mountain towns that are attractive for planners and attendees alike.

Last but not least, New Orleans (page 60) was named the No. 1 City for Food in the U.S. among many other accolades. And all of us who have enjoyed a meal or two in the Big Easy know that is one award richly deserved.

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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News & Notes

Next Level Performance Gains Recognition

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — Next Level Performance, a Dittman Company, has been recognized as one of the Top 10 Employee Engagement Solutions Providers of 2017, and is featured as the Company of the Month by *HR Tech Outlook* magazine for providing best-in-class engagement and incentive solutions and exceptional value to its clients and their people. Dave Dittman, managing director at Next Level Performance, said, "We know that the work we do every day improves business outcomes for our clients and helps people within those organizations reach higher and achieve more." Next Level Performance is at the forefront of the engagement and recognition industry with technology and communications. For more than 40 years, the company has been providing workplace solutions that embrace the evolution of technology tools while keeping programs rooted in best practices.



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www.nxlperformance.com

Caesars Donates Surplus Conference Food

LAS VEGAS, NV — Caesars Entertainment has partnered with Three Square to donate surplus food items from conferences and events through Three Square's Food Rescue program. As a contributor to Three Square's Food Rescue program, Caesars Entertainment is able to take further action towards their Code of Commitment with the ability to simultaneously help fight hunger and reduce waste in the community through their donations.

The Food Rescue program is a safe and reliable donation outlet that sources edible food to feed hungry people in Southern Nevada. Prepared food is recovered from numerous hotel properties, brought back to Three Square and cooled down in a blast chiller to meet recommended health code standards. From there, the food is then repackaged into individual meal servings for various agency partners and for large congregate feeding sites such as the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities and the Las Vegas Rescue Mission. These donations help to provide food assistance to nearly 140,000 hungry men, women and children in Las Vegas every month.

www.caesarsmeansbusiness.com

Carnival Horizon's 2018 Inaugural Schedule to Include Cruises From New York to Bermuda

MIAMI, FL — Carnival Cruise Line has announced that the new Carnival Horizon will offer a series of four-day Bermuda cruises from New York in spring and summer 2018. The four-day "long weekend" cruises will depart Thursdays and feature a full-day visit to Bermuda where guests can relax on the island's legendary pink beaches, enjoy snorkeling, kayaking and other water sports, and visit historical landmarks such as Royal Naval Dockyard and Gibb's Hill Lighthouse, the oldest cast iron lighthouse in the Western Hemisphere. Five four-day Bermuda cruises will be offered, departing May 24, June 21, July 19, Aug. 16 and Sept. 13, 2018. Including the five Bermuda sailings aboard Carnival Horizon, Carnival Cruise Line will offer 18 different voyages to the island in 2017-18 departing from five convenient East Coast homeports, including Baltimore, Charleston, New York, Port Canaveral and Fort Lauderdale. www.carnival.com

Hilton Debuts El San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico

SAN JUAN, PR, and MCLEAN, VA — El San Juan Hotel, a landmark luxury, lifestyle and entertainment property in Puerto Rico, joined Curio – A Collection by Hilton. The 388-room hotel marks the first property in Puerto Rico for Curio – A Collection by Hilton.

The oceanfront property is located in the Isla Verde district of San Juan, situated on two miles of pristine beach.

Designed by Jeffery Beers International, one of the top

hotel and restaurant designers in the world, the modern look and lavish feel of the property can be felt throughout. Providing diverse and distinct dining experiences, El San Juan hotel features five award-winning restaurants overseen by executive chef Gonzalo Rivera. El San Juan Hotel boasts an 11,000-sf grand ballroom — the second largest in San Juan — four pools, six bars and the vibrant El San Juan Beach Club. www.curiocollection3.hilton.com

Snapshots



1



2



3



4



5



6

Credits: 1,2 Jacob Slaton; 3 ESPA; 4,6 ADMEI

1, 2 PCMA's annual conference Convening Leaders, held January 8-11 in Austin, Texas, attracted 4,000 event professionals who were enlightened by inspirational presentations, unique learning experiences, real-world case studies and networking opportunities. The conference helped attendees "understand how audience behaviors are evolving and where design and collaboration intersect." **3** Alenna Fouts, Michael Cavanaugh, Sissy Lawty, CMP, Travel Portland and Susan Hemberry, CMP, Hilton Portland & Executive Tower at the ESPA...Live from Austin! conference, held January 6-8, which welcomed Paul Ruby, CMP with the Sheraton Dallas Hotel, as the new ESPA president. **4** Winners of the 2017 Excellence Awards at the 12th annual Awards Gala at the Association of Destination Management Executives International annual conference in Barcelona, Spain, included (l to r) Rita Davidson, Rhonda Marko, CMP, CMM, DMCP, and Jacqueline Marko of Destination Nashville, a Global DMC Partner, and **5** Alaina Hee, DMCP, AlliedPRA Northern California with Laurie Stroll, CMP, DMCP, Newport Hospitality. **6** Spaintacular, a Global DMC Partner, CEO Nacho Eichler (top left) and guests with (top row, 2nd from right) Robert Lee, DMCP, Spaintacular director of sales and winner of the Joanne O'Connor President's Award.

By Bonnie Boisner and Tina Gaccetta

Small Meetings, Not Small Thinking

For seasoned event planners, we know smaller meetings require the same attention to detail as a larger event, just with a slightly different twist. While the landscape of small events continues to change, here is proven advice that makes planning small events successful.

Down and Dirty Advice for Planning Small Meetings

Think Economically

Don't start from scratch every time. Create a template or process that can be easily replicated for each meeting to follow. One of our clients is a large automotive tire company that provides multiple training sessions for customers. The events are used to present the tires to sellers and resellers in the format of a driving school. In one year, 40 different groups were sent to various events all over the country. To simplify the planning and financial burden on the client, we followed the same process for each of the 40 events, from buying, logistics and customer service support.

Use Your 'A' Team

The fastest way to achieve consistency for small events is familiarity. If you can use the same vendors, hoteliers and/or destination management companies, do it. Keep a list of contacts and vendors for each of the cities in which you are planning events. Safeguard your list and update it regularly. These are essential, yet often overlooked, members of your team.

Communication Is Key

Proactively building an effective communication process onsite is critical to communicate logistics or attendee changes. Communication with the client's trip leader must be frequent and consistent. Daily status updates should be requested to ensure the program is operating smoothly and no action is necessary by the planner.

Executive meetings require even more of a high-touch approach. Understand their expectations — both before and during the meeting — and adjust your communication plan accordingly. Know the medium in which your onsite contact and vendors want to be reached. Do they like in-the-moment text messages or prefer a phone call? These details matter for ease and efficiency.

“The fastest way to achieve consistency for small events is familiarity.”

One of our automotive clients experienced a situation in which a significant number of their small meeting participants' departure flights needed to be rebooked at the last minute. Organizing this change required communication among air services, the meeting planner and the trip leader, who then had to communicate via email and face-to-face with all affected participants. It was an initial panic, but advanced planning led to positive results.

Bring All Logistic Vendors to the Party

For events that do not require an onsite third-party planner, planning a small meeting is like operating a drone. Planners need to be acutely aware of the buttons they are pressing because often they will not be able to fix the problem onsite after it has been made. Planners must work closely with all the logistic vendors and onsite clients to make sure the meeting is operating successfully.

Be Aware of Security Risks

Whether it is a meeting for 20 or more, shortcuts lead to mistakes. Ensuring that digital, financial and onsite security is consistent for every event is a must. Crisis plans need to be communicated well in advance of the event, and holding briefings onsite for the travel staff is necessary. By leveraging smart processes, planners can prepare for secure meetings while maintaining efficiency.

We plan hundreds of pharmaceutical meetings each year. While security is important for all of our clients, pharma com-

Will 2017 be the Year to Incorporate Digital-Free Time in Meetings and Retreats?

While we continue to witness the digital detox trend unfold, the question becomes, how can we incorporate this practice into business meetings and executive retreats?

Executives are among the most connected individuals in the world. The ability to fully detach from technology for days, let alone minutes, is becoming impossible. New technology and tools continue to make our lives easier and help us accomplish tasks faster. Why would we want to part with this for even one day?

Mobile devices can easily become shields and distractors in focused settings. Meetings and retreats are meant to connect people face-to-face, not be used as a free time to answer emails and play catch up outside of the office. With the ability to fully disconnect and recharge with coworkers in a serene setting — one where teambuilding, innovation sessions and detoxification could be done device-less — perhaps by encouraging executives to incorporate digital-free time, they would come back with a new and refreshed focus on the business.

Intimate, face-to-face events can transform opinions, bring about clarity and foster innovation. As event planners, it is our responsibility to enable participants to flourish and be inspired, even if it means asking them to leave their phone and devices at the door.



panies have their own set of compliance rules to follow. In order to pick up any meeting materials, attendees must produce their IDs first, and materials must be picked up in person — not by someone else. Also, all meeting attendees are required to wear their name badge while attending the meeting. Security personnel also patrol the hallways overnight to monitor AV equipment and the integrity of the meeting rooms.

There's no reason for meeting and event professionals to think small when planning a small meeting. The success of any event, whether large or small, depends on seamless coordination among all parties and communication before, during and after the event. (Also, see related story "Find a Great Fit for Your Small Meeting" on page 34.)

C&IT



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By Karen Kotowski, CAE, CMP

Convention Industry Council Shares Meeting & Event Planning Trends for 2017

The events industry was impacted in 2016 by a series of innovations, consolidations, world events, changing demographics and individual preferences. Here are the top trends to pay attention to as curated from the members of the Convention Industry Council.

- **Consolidation.** From airlines, hotels and technology providers, the industry has seen many brands and services consolidating. A CIC member organization, HSMIA has noted this on the hotel side, with consolidations significantly increasing in 2016. While large mergers, such as Marriott and Starwood, are making headlines, last year 15 other hotel companies merged brand management companies and ownership groups — a trend that is likely to continue as competition becomes more and more fierce. This M&A activity will eventually trickle down to our organizations. As an industry and profession, we must be able to adapt and change with the times.
- **Certification is more essential than ever.** According to a PCMA salary survey, meeting professionals holding a CMP certification make on average \$9,000 more annually than those without it. Getting your CMP shows employers that you have dedicated yourself to a higher standard, committed to a goal and reached it. Our certification and member resources enable meeting professionals to scale with the industry.
- **Elevated security concerns.** Organizations, venues and planners are preparing for potential security risks, crises and emergencies, and considering how to budget for them. Cost pressures continue to increase, and while budgets have been rising for the first time over the past 12 to 18 months, there are also rising costs from inflation as well as food and beverage costs. Additionally, related to crisis management, the political landscape has made it precarious for some convention bureaus to attract and retain meetings, when the values of the city or state lawmakers don't align with that of the organizations booking meetings. This has forced some meeting planners to deal with highly

charged and sensitive issues when choosing their meeting destinations.

- **The struggle to stay relevant.** The geopolitical and economic conversation is really more of an ongoing reality than a trend. The reality is that our industry is constantly changing and so the true question is: how are we adapting? In the past, it often has been difficult to create additional revenue streams for meetings and events. Now, meeting professionals are working closely with their event and membership and marketing teams to develop year-round content to create additional attendee touch points. All CIC member organizations and our organization in particular have the responsibility to remain relevant as the industry rapidly changes around us.
- **Creating a brand experience.** One way to stay relevant in the industry is to turn events into a brand experience for attendees. Some of the best ways to do that include: experiential hands-on education, using the latest technology and creating new learning environments. More meeting professionals are experimenting with new ways to engage attendees such as virtual reality, drone footage of the conference and socially conscious art installations. With that, meeting planners are working side by side with marketing teams to create live video on platforms such as Facebook. They also are releasing immediate content on social media channels such as Snapchat and Instagram to showcase their individual experience. A big part of the brand experience should be cultivating authenticity. Customers are looking for a genuine customer service style that feels as personal as possible.
- **Sustainability is more than a trend.** In his role as CIC's CMP Commission Chair, Matt DiSalvo has seen sustainability go from a rising trend to a common practice among meeting planners. Using sustainable products and practices during meetings and conferences makes it clear that event planners are socially responsible and looking towards the future. This is especially true of younger generations. According to a study by Horizon Media's Finger on the Pulse, some 81

percent of millennials expect companies to make a public commitment to good corporate citizenship.

- **Legislation.** Legislative changes relating to social issues continue to occur, and the landscape is changing, so as meeting professionals how do we provide direction and confidence to our attendees and stakeholders that we can get through this period of uncertainty and emerge stronger? What happens when a specific ruling or change directly impacts our business or members? For example, the most recent executive order by President Trump on travel directly affects meetings with attendees

Technology is also a large piece of this trend, especially in regard to content. This also extends to interacting with the growing global audiences as there is an enormous appetite around the world for professional education, clear standards and clear guidelines.

- **Hybridization.** Companies are increasing their business units and are performing multiple business functions within the same industry, which is impacting how organizations provide services and benefits to their members. For example, the recent merger of Cvent and Lanyon combines multiple technology platforms in one with services ranging

“One way to stay relevant in the industry is to turn events into a **brand experience** for attendees.”

outside of the U.S. as well as increases the uncertainty of travel. Meeting professionals must exhibit foresight and plan for the long-term impact and implications both within our organizations and beyond. For instance, ASAE now includes a clause in their contract that they can cancel their meetings due to legislation.

- **Personalized service and education.** All sectors of our industry are receiving more and more demand for personalized services: from content, to membership to meetings themselves. To meet the increased demand for personalized services, organizations and planners must have the resources to develop personalized content as well as analyze the data that is best suited for each sector/member/attendee/business unit. To stay relevant, we cannot stay in the era of top down, one size fits all, for the evolution of the whole professionalism of the industry, personalization is necessary.

from mobile event apps, online event check-in and registration, venue sourcing, email marketing and more

- **Emerging markets.** Organizations are obtaining new members or expanding business into places they have not had members or customers previously. They are considering how they can ensure that their existing ethical and professional standards are being followed while also honoring local customs or cultural aspects of that particular country, particularly when those standards were developed or based on U.S. regulations and practices.

Pay close attention to these trends in your meeting planning for 2017 so the industry and your careers will continue to thrive. If you want to make 2017 the year you jump-start your career, visit www.conventionindustry.org for more information on industry standards, best practices and CMP certification.

C&IT



Karen Kotowski, CAE, CMP

is the president and CEO of Washington, DC-based Convention Industry Council (CIC). The CIC's 33-member organizations represent more than 103,500 individuals and 19,500 firms and properties involved in the meetings, conventions and exhibitions industry. The mission of the Convention Industry Council is to strengthen the value and sustainability of the members, support the premier credential for the meeting professional and provide a vibrant, collaborative platform to address critical issues to ensure a thriving events industry. For more information, visit www.conventionindustry.org.

Cruise Meetings & Incentives



A Celebrity Cruises ship arrives in the port of Labadee on the northern coast of Haiti.

Ship vs. Shore

By Sara Churchill

Credit: Celebrity Cruises

All-Inclusive Perks, Plus New Technology, New Dining & New Experiences Bring Incentive Groups On Board

Whether long and luxe or short and invigorating, incentive cruises offer corporate planners and their attendees a chance to experience a world where the only surprises are good ones.

Two If By Sea

"When a planner comes to me to say 'we need to do something out of the

box,' I say 'let's look to see what's in the box first,'" says Marisol Rangel, CMP, corporate meetings and events specialist with Aqua Global Events. The "box" can contain anyplace in the world that can be reached by ship. For 2017, it just so happens to include the Mediterranean for one of her recurring clients. Rangel has arranged some 15 incentive charters on Silversea Cruises, many of them for an East Coast corporate incentive group of about 260. The Silver Wind and the Silver Cloud, both of which hold 296 people, can perfectly accommodate her attendees, offering each a balcony room.

On their seven-night itinerary, the group will leave from Rome and return to Monte Carlo, with port stops in Sorrento, Amalfi, Portovenere, Livorno and Corsica. Attendees can spend a night on board before the ship leaves port, saving them the

expense of a hotel room on the day of their flight.

Because Rangel's attendees use Silversea's charter option, they enjoy flexibility that groups on larger ships don't, such as setting their own itinerary, staying late in one port and arriving later at another, choosing to dock outside of meeting times and holding a gala dinner. "My group can have a dinner on deck, which not a lot of ships can offer," she says.

The group will hold one meeting in the theater-style show lounge with a guest speaker and will host a gala dinner in the dining room, which can accommodate a dance floor. The group needs to rent a sound system in addition to the one included with the charter to satisfy the dinner dance entertainer's rider; it is Silversea that makes the arrangements beyond the rental fee: clearances, installation, disembarkation and clearing customs.

Rangel's attendees rave about not only the high-energy, onshore excursion

"A cruise is really a less expensive alternative to a hotel. ...Comparing apples to apples, it winds up being a savings. And no surprises."



Marisol Rangel, CMP
Corporate Meetings and Events Specialist
Aqua Global Events LLC
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sions, which can include zip lining and helicopter tours, but also about the onboard culinary experience: choosing their own seafood during a buffet lunch with tour of the kitchen, for example, or cooking their own steak on a hot stone in the Pool Bar & Grill.

"If you have high-end clients, you can't go wrong," she says of the Silversea experience. "You know that nothing will happen. No one will complain." The cruise is all-inclusive for the attendees, including drinks and tips; only the casino and the boutique shops require them, if they choose, to pull out a credit card.

"A cruise is really a less expensive alternative to a hotel," Rangel finds. "When you are negotiating a hotel, there's always going to be surprises later: menu, extra staff, things that would already be included on the ship. Once you've booked a program on a cruise, if you don't change anything, you know exactly what you're going to spend. Comparing apples to apples, it winds up being a savings. And no surprises."

Entering Uncharted Waters

For all the benefits of chartering an incentive cruise, some planners find a set itinerary where attendees are a group within a group also has its advantages. In fact, for incentive cruises at Davie, Florida-based Team National, not chartering



An incentive group enjoys a dinner reception on board a Silversea ship chartered by Aqua Global Events.

Credit: Aqua Global Events

is actually preferable. "We like being on a ship with other people; a lot of people have joined our company having been on a cruise with our people," says Dan Zintsmaster, vice president of events. "Cruise winners often become leaders and move up in the company."

The direct selling company has offered incentive programs on Royal Caribbean for the past 15 years. "We do the three- to four-day cruises so they're not out of the sales field for too long," he says of the twice-yearly cruise incentives. "It looks a little overwhelming in the beginning, but once you get down to a routine, it's one of the easiest, best-rewarding incentives we can do. We've done all-inclusives, but this one you see the hype, the excitement — land-based not as much."

In November, he convened 1,500

sales contest winners on the Enchantment of the Seas, with an itinerary to CocoCay, Nassau and Miami. Royal Caribbean sends a representative aboard with the group who already knows their agenda and routine — typically, a three-hour meeting in the theater or the ice arena where the CEO and owner can share experiences and galvanize the winners, and a bon voyage party toward the end. For the rest, the attendees are left to mingle freely. But it's not that the group just blends in entirely, getting lost on the ship; he has colored T-shirts made up for them to announce their affiliation, and the cruise director sees to it that the group is mentioned in various contexts.

"When I do different events, I have to coordinate AV and food and beverage, whereas on the cruise ship, it's all under one roof, done by one person ahead of time, all in your original contract. I really enjoy being able to have that one-stop shopping. Once I get them on the ship, we're done. That makes it easy for me as a planner to know my budget," Zintsmaster says.

And while he's bullish on cruise incentives in general, he finds: "Royal Caribbean is higher-level than some of the others, with a nice range of cabins and options in a nice price range. You can upgrade to suite; you can have a small cocktail party in a suite. You can choose to leave out of Fort Lauderdale or Miami."

Since his company holds biweekly contests, he finds cruises to be a scalable and essentially self-marketing sales incentive; the higher the sales once the cruise is already achieved, the more perks



Cruise incentive sales contest winners with direct-selling company Team National enjoy their Royal Caribbean experience.

Credit: Team National

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Princess Cruises' 60-foot-long, glass-bottomed SeaWalk hovers 128 feet above the ocean.

Credit: Princess Cruises

for the attendee: a stateroom with a balcony or view, a junior suite, the chance to bring additional family members.

"Royal Caribbean is great to work with. Their incentives team is awesome: hands-on and great. They can help with ground and air. We've had great luck, and

"Royal Caribbean's incentives team is awesome: hands-on and great. ...They continue to make a great product that just gets better."



Dan Zintsmaster
Vice President of Events
Team National
Davie, FL

they continue to make a great product that just gets better with new ships and retrofitted old ships."

High Tech on the High Seas

That the cruise industry has come into its high-tech own was never more evident than at this year's CES, where for the first time, the keynote address was delivered by a travel industry executive: Carnival Corporation CEO Arnold Donald. He extolled the virtues of the company's new Ocean Medallion, a disc the size of a watch face that attendees wear or carry. The medallion links to the ship's digital concierge system, Ocean Compass,

through either one of the attendee's own mobile devices or one of the ship's. The complimentary Ocean Medallion is sent to the attendee's home address, where he can key his dietary and entertainment preferences into the system, providing the crew with access to it for the duration of the cruise. The medallion acts as a de facto key card, check-in station, people-finder system, food and beverage delivery service to anywhere on the ship, and shipboard credit card, among other uses. Attendees can use the system to sign up for shore excursions and spa treatments, and to make dinner reservations.

The Medallion Class Ocean ships also will have upgraded Wi-Fi and won't actually cost more than other types of cruise ships in the fleet.

The combination of onboard sensors and the disc enables the ship's system to essentially follow attendees around the ship; eventually, certain offshore areas — Port Everglades cruise terminal, some spots at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport and Princess Cruises' private cays — will be wired for Ocean Medallion/Ocean Compass.

The new tech is the brainchild of a former Imagineer who developed a similar concept, MyMagic+ band, for Disney. The system will roll out in November on Princess Cruises' Regal Princess, then on Royal Prin-

cess in January 2018 and Caribbean Princess in March 2018.

Separately, Carnival's Hub smartphone app, which lets attendees keep apprised of onboard activities, chat with others on the ship and check out dining options, is being upgraded for more personalization and extended to the ships that don't yet have it.

Royal Caribbean's RFID-operated Wow bands also perform some of the same functions as the Ocean Medallion, namely, expedited check-in, key card, and credit card, and sister lines RC and Celebrity plan to revamp their current customer-centric phone app mid-year with more options and possibly to use voice-activated concierges on a new line of ships to debut in 2018, Celebrity Edge.

Onboard Foodie

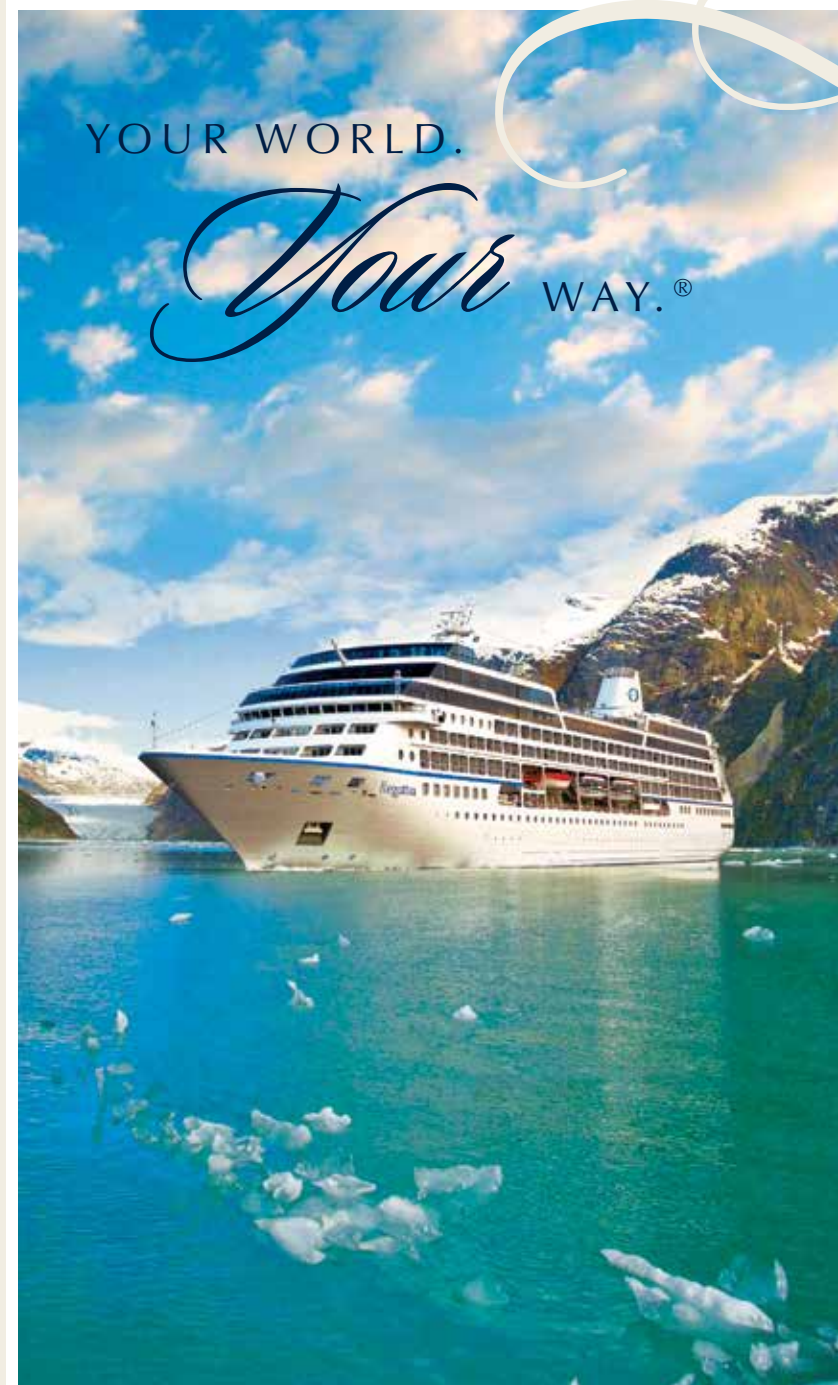
As exciting as first-adopting new tech can be, nothing is quite as incentivizing as a world-class meal. Indeed, Oceania Cruises bolsters its trademarked claim to purveying "The Finest Cuisine at Sea" by having master chef Jacques Pépin as its executive culinary director. The line's Marina and Riviera ships showcase his namesake restaurant Jacques, which serves classic French cuisine and features a show rotisserie where the night's offerings slowly turn on the spit. The foodie spirit extends to shore excursions: Culinary Discovery Tours offer attendees the chance to visit local markets in the company of a chef and, back on board, take a hands-on cooking class at The Culinary Center. La Reserve by Wine Spectator, also available on Marina and Riviera, offers a small-group chef's table menu paired with wine.

Celebrity, too, offers chef-based shore excursions through its Chef's Market Discoveries program on European and Ca-



Carnival CEO
Arnold Donald
with the new
Ocean Medallion.

Credit: Carnival Corporation



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Oceania Cruises claims "The Finest Cuisine at Sea" by having master chef Jacques Pépin as its executive culinary director.



by Relais & Châteaux. Given that the cruise line touts it as "the highest expression of excellence of French dining that Silver Muse has to offer," this restaurant promises to exceed even the La Champagne Relais & Châteaux that will also be on board when the ship comes online in April.

Silversea Expeditions has two new Culinary Expedition Voyages for 2017 on the all-suite, 132-guest Silver Explorer. In October, the "Epicurean Adventure along the Humboldt Current," a 14-day trip to Peru and

Chile, will introduce attendees to pisco sours and fine dining in a restaurant located among the ruins of an adobe pyramid and to a gourmet meal in a 16th century monastery, among other delights. On board, guest chefs and wine experts from South America will participate in the culinary director's workshops.

New Ports, New Experiences

On some cruises, enrichment activities aren't just a happy offshoot but the central focus. Fathom cruises, for example, provide attendees the option to have "social impact" by providing community service as an offshore excursion in the Dominican Republic. While parent company Carnival Corporation is expecting delivery on 17 ships through 2022, among them the 3,934-passenger Carnival Horizon in March 2018, it plans to shutter its Fathom line in June and continue the CSR experience on some of its other lines.

Until then, six of the 704-person Fathom Adonia's tours to the Dominican Republic also include a stop in Santiago de Cuba, and it offers several itineraries to Cuba through May 2017, with stops in Santiago de Cuba, Havana and Cienfuegos.

Over the past year, many Caribbean itineraries have come to include Cuba. Royal Caribbean's Empress of the Seas will be the largest U.S. cruise ship to stop

had its maiden voyage in January, may currently shine brightest. Its partnership with chef Thomas Keller of Napa's French Laundry and New York's Per Se has yielded at least two onboard eateries: The Restaurant, the ship's main dining room and The Grill by Thomas Keller, a smaller, more casual space. The Ovation also will feature Keller offerings when it's ready in spring 2018.

Certainly, it would be hard for the 750-person Regent Seven Seas Explorer to bill itself as the "most luxurious ship ever built" if it, too, were not consumed with proffering exquisite food. For now, this is also the only ship in the fleet to offer Gourmet Explorer Tours to various sites in Italy, Spain, Greece, Morocco, France, Portugal, Monaco and Slovenia. The cruise line celebrates its 25th anniversary all year with 25 chosen voyages across a variety of itineraries and all four

ships (Explorer, Voyager, Mariner and Navigator). Among the festivities: Attendees can enter the galley along a red carpet to attend a lunch buffet with fresh bread, carving stations, pasta prepared to order and desserts as they mingle with the chefs. These same 25 sailings will offer Silver Anniversary Tastings: vintage and other top-shelf wine

and spirits seminars.

Silversea's 597-passenger Silver Muse boasts white-glove dining at La Dame



Sandra L. Barnhart
President and CEO
CruiseMeetings.com
St. Petersburg, FL

"For me, it's a no-brainer; I always get better ROI on a cruise meeting than at a resort."



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The observation lounge on Regent Seven Seas Mariner.

Credit: Regent Seven Seas

in Havana when it does so for the first time in April on a five-night cruise from Miami, with a later five-night and seven-night trip from Tampa.

May also will see the start of Havana overnights on NCL's all-inclusive Norwegian Sky, which offers five four-day cruises from Miami. Attendees will have a chance to experience Old Havana's art and music, along with "people-to-people exchanges." The itinerary also includes a stop on NCL's private Bahamas island Great Stirrup Cay. Regent Seven Seas Mariner has two sailings in April with overnights in Havana, leaving from Miami and also stopping on the line's private island in Belize, Harvest Caye.

No-Brainer for Planners

One planner who's found a way to make creative use of port stops for meetings is Sandra L. Barnhart, president and CEO of CruiseMeetings.com. For 2017, she's working with a corporate group on a 76-attendee incentive at sea; she also often handles continuing medical education cruises and has often hosted groups on Celebrity. "We have found them very good to work with," she says of the cruise line. "We have someone dedicated to us who handles our contracts. It's really nice to have one person to handle the management."

Celebrity also has a department dedicated specifically to handling planning at ports. "I'm dealing with a total of three people I know I can go to and they will handle everything I need," she says of the line. "I won't be sent down a phone tree. They're very responsive; the same day I send a request. The service level makes my life a lot easier."

For groups with certain needs, not chartering offers a challenge in that exhibit space is limited, and an awards dinner complete with speeches in the main dining hall is, obviously, untenable. For these situations, Barnhart has some go-to workarounds. For awards, for example, she plans a cocktail reception in one of the lounges, with either "freestyle dining"



Boardroom on the Norwegian Sky.

Credit: Norwegian Cruise Line

for the attendees afterward, or space blocked out in the dining room with set decorations and table assignments.

And while planners won't always charter the ship, they can, in a sense, charter the port stops. Scheduled shore excursions aside, she often arranges events — teambuilding programs, barbecues, beach parties — in ports or on private islands. (Celebrity's 2,886-passenger Silhouette, for example, stops on the private CocoCay on its western Caribbean itineraries.) "You can have something customized," she notes. "Some ships will bring special entertainment to the port."

And when she needs exhibit space, she'll even plan an in-port exhibit day. In Nassau, for example, she planned a day in a hotel with music, exhibits set up and hors d'oeuvres. To deter attrition, she planned a drawing with the names of attendees who'd stopped by each booth to have their ballots initialed.

Barnhart has been involved in meetings on ships as either a purchaser or an organizer since the early 1980s, when ships didn't have formal meeting space. But over the past 15 years, she says, cruise lines have adapted to the special needs of meeting groups with dedicated meeting space; even, on some ships, a conference center that offers a similar look and feel to a hotel ballroom.

But it's on the balance sheet that the similarity ends. "The biggest thing is the controlled budget; no surprises. An organization goes in knowing what their end

cost will be. Including meals, it is usually about the same as a resort would be for just the room." Because cruise lines can source goods from any port worldwide, they can often pass along better deals, according to Barnhart. "So they can give away more and still make a nice profit themselves. You can negotiate all kinds of amenities for the organization: free cocktail party, etc.

"A resort is a lot more work, and your budget is always in question — they charge you almost by the individual bite," she says. "For me, it's a no-brainer; I always get better ROI on a cruise meeting than at a resort." **C&IT**



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Site Selection



There are 10 Convene conference center locations in three cities, including seven in New York City.



The Conference Center *Alternative*

Availability, Flexibility and Dedication to Getting Business Done Attract Corporate Meetings

By
Patrick Simms

The ongoing seller's market in the hotel industry has not only been good for hotels. Conference centers also have benefited in scenarios where low availability in the hotel space has driven planners to explore other venue options. And after a planner has a positive experience with conference centers and their proficiency in handling corporate meetings, that option may soon become a preference.

Steve Goodman, managing partner with Atlanta-based MeetingAdvice, has observed a recent ramp up in the utilization of conference cen-

ters by his corporate clients. Groups are finding "greater availability in many of the conference centers" in the current market, where "we're going much further outside the box in looking for site options for clients," he says. In some cases, that means a little less logistical convenience. For example, "If a group flies into Atlanta airport, they could be in a traditional hotel in 15 minutes. But you have to figure a half hour to an hour drive to reach a conference center in the area. As a result of the compression that we're seeing in the market, however, clients are more open to going out-

side your traditional radius." The end result can certainly be rewarding. "We have clients that have experienced the conference center environment in the last several months, and they love it," Goodman adds.

Of course, many planners need no introduction to the virtues of conference centers and have been devotees for some time. Tony Pastor, manager at McKinsey & Company, has found the facilities ideal for "about 95 percent" of the company's internal learning programs, which generally bring in about 30 attendees. The company has seen enough ROI from the conference

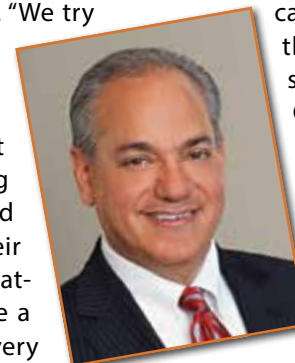
center experience to warrant a deeper partnership with one of these facilities, where they have been utilizing an entire floor exclusively. "We try to put most of our North American programs into that facility," says Pastor. "The floor represents about 70 percent of their meeting space, and we have agreed to book 70 percent of their sleeping rooms. We renovated the floor and did quite a bit of branding. It's been very well received so far; everybody in our firm wants to try the new place."

In-Depth Understanding

Whether a group books a floor or a room at a conference center, they can enjoy a level of service that many planners feel is superior to that of a hotel. Conference centers focus exclusively on meeting

groups, including those whose programs last a week or more. And quite arguably, that translates to a more in-depth understanding of their needs.

"We're in the business of planning learning events and not in the event planning business per se, so we don't want to spend a lot of time and en-



Steve Goodman, Managing Partner
MeetingAdvice, Atlanta, GA

"We have clients that have experienced the conference center environment in the last several months, and they love it."

Conference Centers in the News

The new Robert B. Rowling Hall is scheduled to open in July at the 297-room AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center, in Austin, Texas. Adding to the 40,000 sf of existing conference space, the Hall includes a 15,000-sf ballroom complemented by 5,000 sf of prefunction space and a 5,500-sf banquet kitchen and bakery. It will be located across the street from the current building and accessible by underground connection. Additionally, the property completed a renovation of its 297 guest rooms and suites last spring. New staff with more than 20 years of hotel industry experience each were recently added: Alison Berg, director of sales and marketing; Cheryl Shirley, director of catering; and Bob Danhauer, director of conference services.

The latest addition to the Dolce portfolio is Wye River, a Dolce Conference Center set on a 1,100-acre plantation an hour outside of Washington, DC. The hotel features 4,000 sf of meeting space, outdoor athletic space, a helipad and Cold War-era bomb shelter. In addition, the Dolce Washington



Rendering of the Robert B. Rowling Hall prefunction area.

Credit: AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center

Dulles will open in 2018. The property will offer 243 guest rooms and more than 13,000 sf of meeting space. It is the second new hotel slated to join the Dolce brand since it was acquired by Wyndham Hotel Group in 2015.



Wye River, a Dolce Conference Center, is set on a 1,100-acre plantation.

Credit: Dolce Hotels & Resorts

The National Conference Center, in Leesburg, Virginia, has undergone an 18-month transformation that follows a patriotic theme throughout the refurbished exteriors, lobby, guest rooms and food and beverage outlets. Farm-to-table cuisine replaced the buffet in the 900-seat dining room, and a new speakeasy-style lounge called the National Secret debuted. The facility continues its capital investment this year with additional renovations to its meeting space, including



The National Conference Center's new National Secret lounge.

Credit: The National Conference Center

enhanced technology, floor and wall treatments, pathway lightening and the updating of courtyards with fire pits and landscaping. These Phase II renovations will be completed by year-end. — PS

ergy on meal planning or scheduling breaks," says Pastor, suggesting that conference centers take those responsibilities off a planner's shoulders. And the service begins well before the meeting. "I've got one contact there who's working with me starting six weeks prior, and who's there to meet me the day of the program and is there the whole week for the most part," Pastor adds.

In her relationship with the National Conference Center, Laura Joubert, leadership development program, operations, manager with BAE Systems, has also experienced service that goes the extra mile. "They accommodate unusual requests from us," says Joubert about the Leesburg, Virginia, facility, which offers 917 guest rooms and more than 265,000 sf of meeting and function space. "For example, we are

all about conserving nature, so they had coolers installed instead of using bottled water. And each one of us, as a souvenir of the conference, every year gets a water bottle to carry around to refill," she relates.

Among various teambuilding activities, BAE Systems' leadership development participants must build 6- 10-foot-tall trebuchets (a kind of medieval siege engine that throws stones via a counterweight mechanism) in order to hit distant targets. "The National Conference Center helps us conserve the materials that we bring in for the project," Joubert notes. "And they don't need to do that; they could just say that's your problem." The staff even set up a dojo in the ballroom, helping the group rent mats and jiu-jitsu gis for their conflict

resolution class for third-year leadership development participants.

In addition, Joubert has seen evidence that the National Conference Center staff takes feedback from their clients very seriously. "They always set up meetings after the fact to ask, 'What did you like and what can we do better?' And the next time we go there we see they've implemented what we asked. So if we say we want a salad bar, we actually see it the next time. They don't just give you lip service," she says.

Breakout availability and flexibility are important to the BAE Systems group, and it's one of the strengths of conference centers in general. The National Conference Center has 250 meeting rooms organized into five distinct areas, as well the ability to

group several conference "pods" in proximity and then open up the space as needed, Joubert describes. Her participants are mostly millennials and highly active, quickly moving from one activity to another throughout the program. "We didn't want to lose people in transition, and the layout of the National is perfect because we can have our first-



"The National Conference Center helps us conserve the materials that we bring in for the project. And they don't need to do that; they could just say that's your problem."

Laura Joubert, Leadership Development Program, Operations, Manager
BAE Systems, Boston, MA

year group together, our second year and third year. And then we can bring them all together in the larger space," she says. Plus, "it feels like it's only your group (in house) even though the

at Abel McCallister Designs, the independent production company that staged the launch.

"We were (showcasing) 10 different products and brands at the same

"Convene was very flexible in allowing us to come into the rooms and do complete build-outs, changing the whole look. The space was actually beautiful."

Larry Abel, Owner/Partner
Abel McCallister Designs, Nashville, TN

National's capacity is humongous. So there are other events going on but you don't feel they're encroaching."

Flexible Spaces

The flexible breakout spaces conference centers offer can be a boon not only to the traditional corporate training program. In October, a major global products company found the rooms at Convene in New York City (117 West 46th Street) to be ideal for a beauty product launch — not the typical event that suggests a conference center. "When one of my producers in New York said, 'I've got this conference center for the event,' I said, 'Really?' 'Trust me, you have to see it,' he said," relates Larry Abel, owner/partner

time, and the client wanted to have a site where they could bring everyone together (about 150 attendees in total) and then break off into individual presentations and rotate around," he says. "Convene was very flexible in allowing us to come into the rooms and do complete build-outs, changing the whole look. The space was actually beautiful, very sleek and modern, yet decorated neutrally."

At its 46th Street location, Convene houses 35,000 sf of total space, including the 700-capacity Forum, Living Room, Gallery and two Hubs. The company has nine other locations: six in New York City, two in Philadelphia and one in the DC metro area. On the AV side, the group found it helpful that

"all the systems were already built in. Some rooms even had video screens on three walls, any of which can be used depending which way you want everybody to face," says Abel.

Tuned in to the Group's Needs

The best conference centers anticipate a group's needs, as BAE Systems found to be true for their experience at the National Conference Center. The BAE Systems group are known to be "grazers" when it comes to F&B, and so the National Conference Center staff welcomed them with a snack area they had created. "And we didn't ask them to do that," Joubert notes. "We also have people who require special meals, and we have a lot of people that are gluten-free. And they've been really terrific about labeling food. We've been at other venues where they don't do that, and then we end up having issues with somebody who is allergic to mushrooms, for instance, and they didn't know it was in the food."

Perhaps most impressively, the National Conference Center went the extra mile for their client by building a ropes course to their specifications. The new course was one of the primary reasons BAE Systems selected the



BAE Systems took advantage of The National Conference Center's meeting space and experiential training program.



Credits: The National Conference Center

property for the leadership conference, bringing along its longtime teambuilding facilitation team from the University of New Hampshire's Browne Center. "And the advantage for them is that any company, not just BAE, can go to The National and have experiential training there," Joubert remarks. Not all ropes courses are created equal, she adds. "I looked at other conference centers that have ropes courses but they're dinky and would not withstand the traffic of (the approximately 160) people we put through those courses."

Experiential Learning

In December, the National Conference Center and the Browne Center identified "Six Trends in Experiential Learning for 2017," and among them was "Learning By Choice," where classroom training is mixed with outdoor activities like ropes courses. The National's Challenge Course has both high and low rope elements, enabling participants to choose their level of physical challenge. Another trend was "Barrier-Free Learning," essentially "hands-on training in a lab-like setting versus the traditional meeting room or classroom," the white paper describes. In response to this trend, the National has created a workroom and lab for simulation or scenario training. With the ample grounds that many confer-

ence centers have, the meeting room walls need not be barriers, either. "If the weather's nice a team will just grab its flipchart walk it outside," Pastor comments. A change of scenery is "important when you're talking about a program that lasts for five days. And our meetings run from eight in the morning until five or six in the evening."

The other four trends identified by the National Conference Center and the Browne Center are "Learning By Shared Experiences," which emphasize collaboration among everyone from C-level executives to assistant managers; "Learning By Silence," where participants are allowed more time for reflection and mediation; "Learning By Doing," where attendees engage in an activity that connects to a skill they hope to improve or develop; and "Learning Through Application," a post-program debriefing that assists participants to connect learning to their work at the office.

More Trends

More trends in the conference center sector come from the second installment of IACC's Meeting Room of the Future study, released in October. Surveying more than 65 venues, including a large number of IACC-certified properties, the study presents numerous in-

sights into the state of meeting room design and technology. A key finding is that a majority of venue operators and suppliers are seeing it as their responsibility to support attendee engagement via approaches such as gamification, design thinking and matchmaking.

While conference centers provide numerous advantages to their clients, including the kind of thought leadership described above, it's also wise to consider the advantages one's booking pattern may bring to these facilities, which can create negotiating leverage. Pastor has found that conference centers tend to struggle on weekends, so a weekend arrival pattern may be of interest to them. Program duration is also a factor. "Anything less than four nights makes it a jigsaw puzzle for them to put together," he observes. And since their clientele tend to book on the short term (three to six months out), planners bringing longer-term business will have the advantage, he maintains. The planner will have more space available, and the property will be able to secure its revenue earlier than usual.

Indeed, as planners increasingly utilize conference centers as an option to competing for hotel meeting space, booking these facilities in the short term may become less and less feasible. **C&IT**

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How to Negotiate the Best Deal

Planners Share Their Pointers on How to Avoid Contentious Clauses

By Maura Keller

Taking appropriate steps to understand hotel contracts and unique clauses that may become contentious is paramount in the corporate meeting and incentive travel industry.

When Anthony Taccetta, corporate event planner and owner of Anthony Taccetta Event Design in New York City, works with a hotel negotiating contracts and clauses, he makes sure everything is in writing and is put on a timeline that gets shared with hotel personnel well in advance. The timeline should be signed off by appropriate parties to ensure all the details will go according to plan. Beyond the obvious room block, meeting space, cancellation, relocation, etc., there are a few clauses in traditional hotel contracts that are requiring a bit more detail and conversation in today's hotel market.

As Nicole McCoy, director, global sourcing for Bishop-McCann, a fully integrated event management agency in Kansas City, Missouri, explains, the popularity of services such as Airbnb requires meeting planners to pay closer attention to attrition clauses to ensure

that projected and contracted blocks are attainable.

"Work with the hotel to define contingency plans if you anticipate a disruption to your room block utilization due to those outside forces. Additionally, hotel renovations have been on the rise in the last year, and as a result, it's crucial to ensure the contract outlines how the parties agree to work through it."

It's not always known at the time of signature that a renovation will be occurring, so McCoy suggests that clauses cover the client's expectations of the timeliness of notification, a communication plan shortly following the acknowledgement, and the financial responsibilities if the event is unable to take place or if the renovation will compromise the integrity of the program. Then, if a renovation project arises, the parameters are already in place.

Planners also should have a contractual understanding of how specific elements within the hotel work. For example, how does the loading dock operate? Are there restricted hours? Is it union? Does the freight elevator re-

quire an operator? The hotel may have regular deliveries scheduled so planners need to make sure the vendors can get in and out in a timely manner.

And Taccetta makes sure he has a full understanding of what is happening in the rest of the hotel.

"There are a lot of moving parts that allow a hotel to operate smoothly and your event is just one piece of a very large puzzle, and you must understand where you fit in that puzzle," Taccetta says.

Common mistakes planners make when it comes to hotel contracts is staffing and assuming "the hotel will take care of it."

"Make sure you know exactly what the hotel provides, and it is clearly identified in hotel contract clauses," Taccetta says. That may include everything from the duration that rooms are allocated to be used by your group to the number of bartenders and servers appointed to each orchestrated dining event that is scheduled.

It's also important to make sure that the contract does not include unre-

Embracing Technology

Technology continues to play a key role in meeting and event management. In fact, a number of organizations are now tracking their hotel prices, enabling them to not only save money when prices drop, but also allowing event and travel managers to measure the effectiveness of their supplier negotiations, and establish important benchmarks for enhancing future negotiations.

For example, RoomIQ is being used to track hotel prices and rebook when a lower rate becomes available. However, RoomIQ also provides deeper insights into room rates, spotlighting highly detailed data on every single rate monitored, and allowing these companies to summarize their data in a number of meaningful ways.

RoomIQ customers can use the reporting capabilities to quickly assess the actual dollar value of common amenities such as parking, breakfast and internet access — or to measure the financial impact of making simple reservation adjustments, such as moving from a king size bed to a queen. RoomIQ customers also have visibility into whether the lower rates were found within the exact room type, or whether the traveler booked a superior room, such as a room with a view or a club level room, while a lower standard rate was available.

When it comes to enhancing negotiations, RoomIQ data can be separated by hotel brand or by specific property — offering a close examination of negotiated rates compared to public rates, including both fixed market rates and dynamic rates. It also assesses the dollar value of amenities and various room types (i.e. view, superior, club level) summarized by brand and detailed down to the property level.

— MK



Anthony Taccetta

Corporate Event Planner, Owner
Anthony Taccetta Event Design
New York, NY

“Get everything organized so that the hotel has a full and complete understanding of your timeline and goals.”

alistic load in and load out times. For example, some hotels require evacuating space by noon on the last day of the program when another group is booked on that day. Meeting such a deadline for elaborate setups may result in extra cost. Indeed, it is vital that meeting planners double-check that the hotel has scheduled the group for the correct dates, and that they’re allowing enough time for setup and tear down, says Ali Pena, meeting planner and chief executive officer, Forums Corporate Event Planning, a company based in Miami that works with Fortune 500 clients.

“Because hotels have several sales reps that don’t always communicate with each other, they can make a lot of mistakes,” Pena says. “We’ve come across this problem on various occasions. For our larger conferences, the hotel will promise us that we have all of the space available and then tell us that there is a small group having a meeting in one of the ballrooms at the last minute. This creates chaos and upsets the client. It’s important that you are in contact with both the sales team and the manager of the hotel so that you have leverage when this type of situation arises.”

Negotiating Basics

When it comes to contentious hotel clauses, and even those that are not deemed contentious, communication is always the key. Therefore, during the contracting phase, it’s important to discuss how terms would impact possible scenarios to ensure both sides are in agreement.

“If a clause is confusing, further discussion with examples will be the way to create mutually agreeable language,” McCoy says. “If that isn’t successful, I would encourage a planner to seek the resources available to them through a sourcing specialist or hospitality lawyer. Depending on the overall value of the contract, outside assistance can mitigate risk and liability for a nominal cost of the overall program value.”

In the contract, the hotel needs to be clear about exactly what space you can and cannot use. Some hotels might specify a ballroom but not the foyer, which creates logistics problems for registration. Planners need to make sure they specify the exact spaces and where they are located in the hotel so that the space truly accommodates the needs of the meeting.

Hotel renovations is another area that Pena has encountered. “Although a hotel’s sales staff promises you that renovations will be over by the time your group

arrives, normally renovations are delayed,” Pena says. “You should have the hotel include phrasing that guarantees what the backup plan will be if the hotel is still being renovated. Again, it’s important not only to involve the sales team but the manager of the hotel.”

Taccetta recommends that meeting and event planners make sure that every “I” is dotted and every “T” is crossed before any contract is signed with a hotel or other venue.

“Get everything organized so that the hotel has a full and complete understanding of your timeline and goals,” Taccetta says. “Do not assume anything and have as many details as possible included in the contract.”

In fact, planners should be as specific as possible when working with the hotel on contracts. If that means showing them a rooming block, setup diagrams and other details, planners should do it as it will help avoid miscommunication.

“Put as much detail into your requirements as possible and make sure that you communicate it via email so that you have the information in writing,” Pena says. “We’ve sometimes had an issue with the hotel being sold out. It’s important to make sure that the hotel can send your attendees to a property nearby in case there are no rooms available. The property should be able to offer rates comparable or at a lower cost than the conference hotel.”

And when dealing with contentious clauses in a hotel contract, what has worked best for Pena’s team is to not only work with the sales team, but also to first contact the regional sales director in charge of the property.

“That way, you are treated as an important account right from the start,” Pena says. “You also want to meet with the hotel’s manager and establish a relationship with him or her. This will help you in case any issues arise.”

Avoid These Mistakes

Meeting and event professionals are typically experts in their field but many



Nicole McCoy,
Director, Global Sourcing
Bishop-McCann, Kansas City, MO

“It is critical to approach negotiations with the goal that the contract is written clearly enough that it can stand alone and be implemented by people not directly involved in the contracting process.”

may not fully understand all of the aspects of the legally binding contracts or clauses, which can lead to extra fees and/or the meeting needs not being met or fulfilled.

“I think it is easy to fall into the mindset that everyone involved in the contracting process will also be at the execution of the event,” McCoy says. “This is not always the case, and happens even more frequently with contracts signed several years in advance. I think it is critical to approach negotiations with the goal that the contract is written clearly enough that it can stand alone and be implemented by people not directly involved in the contracting process.”

Also, with attendees traveling with multiple devices all requiring an internet connection, the need for dedicated internet bandwidth is more important than ever. McCoy believes strongly that AV needs should be incorporated into contract negotiations from the beginning of the process. AV can be a huge hit to the budget, and planners may leave money on the table if they don’t address those needs and associated costs during negotiations.

“Also, many hotel contracts incorporate other documents into the agreement, and it’s imperative those documents are reviewed with the same level of detail as the contract itself,” McCoy says. “Often, those documents outline further costs associated with the program — AV surcharges, room setup fees, etc. — and a planner needs to ensure such ancillary documents don’t contain any surprises. Your budget will thank you.”

When it comes to contract negotia-

Remember These Key Issues

- Not being locked into food and beverage minimums that are not based on the client’s needs or budget.
- Being privy to the cancellation and deposit policies.
- Being knowledgeable as to what hotel contract terms mean.
- Asking plenty of questions.
- Always keeping the client’s meeting needs and budget in mind when negotiating room rentals, sleeping room rates and food and beverage minimums.
- Always thoroughly reviewing the contract prior to your client reviewing and signing the contract.

— MK

tions, planners often make the mistake of not being specific enough and not putting things in writing.

Forums Corporate Event Planning produced a major conference at one of the larger hotels in Miami Beach. They requested the use of the entire convention space because they had more than 100 meetings happening back-to-back and simultaneously.

"We were counting on the use of one of the hotel's boardrooms for a C-level meeting and 30 minutes before the meeting was scheduled, the hotel informed us that they had scheduled another client in the room," Pena says. "We had to scramble and have the hotel convert a suite into a boardroom so that we could accommodate the executives and place one of our team members in front of the meeting room to direct the executives to the new room. Unfortunately, the hotel did not offer us a solution to the problem so we had to think quickly, and luckily the executives were not put off by the experience."

Pena cautions planners to "provide a detailed RFP including a rough minute-by-minute schedule, production diagrams, branding needs and everything in between. Once you receive the hotel proposal, if you can, schedule a meeting to meet with the sales staff and walk through all the spaces in your contract. Then, ask to meet with the hotel manager and discuss the importance of the event and try and have him or her stay while you discuss the logistics."

Room Blocks & Attrition Fees

One of the key hotel clauses that often prove to be the most contentious pertains to room blocks. Room blocks offer many advantages for attendees and hosts alike. In addition to offering discounted room rates to attendees, room blocks can simplify the scheduling process and streamline the transportation of attendees when they are staying at the same locale.



Tiffany Chalk
Owner and Meeting Planner
Tiffany Chalk Events
Philadelphia, PA

"Any contract clauses that are not applicable to your meeting or event should have an amendment to the contract that is suitable to your meeting needs."

However, some organizations do not want to be financially responsible if the block does not fill. Attrition fees are imposed on organizations when scheduling large room blocks. A planner can ask for a lower percentage of minimum pickup, and/or request a resell clause, which states that any attrition fee would be waived if the property is able to resell the unreserved guest rooms at an equal or higher-rated value.

The element that is most concerning to a client is the financial commitment to fill the rooms, especially for a first time event, or one without a history of room pickup to use as a reference.

"Attrition on sleeping rooms can be challenging at times especially if the client does not want to be financially responsible if the block does not meet its

capacity," says Tiffany Chalk, owner and meeting planner at Tiffany Chalk Events in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

And when it comes to actually managing large room blocks, where the individuals must call to reserve a room for themselves, meeting planners should ask for biweekly pickup reports and guest-name lists about two months from the cutoff date. Often there are situations where the block will be close to selling out, and planners want to stay proactive in terms of working with the hotel partner to add more availability, or find nearby partner hotels if needed.

On the flip side, if the rooms book up more slowly than anticipated, marketing strategies should be adjusted to encourage attendees to book their rooms — either by an incentive, such as a welcome gift or hotel coffee shop gift card, or just by letting attendees know of the benefits of staying at the official conference hotel.

"Any contract clauses that are not applicable to your meeting or event should have an amendment to the contract that is suitable to your meeting needs," Chalk says. "If something is confusing, please clarify before signing off on the contract."

Following internal company policies including legal, risk management and compliance approval, is always key. McCoy stresses that a second set of eyes is always helpful, and her department regularly exercises this safeguard to ensure each clause is looked at from all angles.

"With the volume that our sourcing managers handle, it's so helpful to leverage that overall expertise for stronger hotel contracts," McCoy says. "For planners that only have a few contracts per year to negotiate, or may only have one or two planners in their company, requesting outside assistance from industry colleagues or an outside resource can help a planner (avoid) feeling lost or overwhelmed in the legal language and ensure confidence that the final version of the contract is precisely what (was) intended." **C&IT**

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Site Selection



Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC, hosted RedPeg Marketing's teambuilding programs and meetings.

Find a Great Fit for Your Small Meeting

From Rural to Urban, a Look at Locales That Cater to Planners' Needs

By Ron Bernthal

A small meeting or executive retreat is usually defined as a group requiring between 10–100 rooms, which may seem much easier to organize and book than the mega-meetings that fill giant Las Vegas or New York hotels. However, small meetings often may be harder to book because of their shorter booking window, which reduces opportunities for prime space and preferred dates.

It also may be more difficult to secure the much desired comps and discounts

that often come with booking more room nights and larger F&B events. However, small groups also make up the bulk of corporate business for most hotels because sales managers can confirm small room blocks within the shorter lead time, and will try and fit smaller groups in between and around other large meetings and conventions. In fact, the revenue from small groups has become so important to most hotels that venues are now hiring sales managers especially trained in the art of work-

ing with planners with small corporate group business.

Special Challenges for Meeting Planners

Small group meetings and executive retreats have their own special challenges for meeting planners. When does a group become so small that it flies under the radar at a large venue with bigger groups in-house? Are venues reluctant to offer smaller groups the nice discounts and freebies that larger groups

are getting? What venues not only desire to host smaller groups, but go out of their way to make the attendees feel special and cater to their every need?

"The staff of Partners in Planning Inc. try to offer small groups between 50 and 100 attendees VIP service at the hotels and resorts we use," says Nancy Caine, president, Partners in Planning Inc., an Ohio-based meeting planning company that works with many corporate clients.

"If you are responsible for booking a smaller meeting, here are some of our recommendations. When possible look for a smaller hotel option, but there are also several full-service resorts and hotels that can give your group an unforgettable experience," says Caine, addressing the question of what types of properties are best suited to handle the smaller corporate group meetings and/or executive retreats. "We used Willows Lodge in Washington state, the Waldorf Astoria, other small luxury properties and some overseas boutique hotels to make that happen. Should you not be able to use a smaller hotel, make sure the meeting space for your group in a large venue is self-contained and separate from other groups."

What Is the True Value of Your Group?

Some hotel sales managers will look at your initial RFP that mentions 10 room nights and decide it isn't even worth a return phone call. Caine offers some advice most meeting planners know but perhaps forget to mention in the initial RFP. "Since hotels are looking at the number of room nights booked, when your room night number is not as large as other groups, it is important to demonstrate the value of your group revenue. We do this by outlining food and beverage functions, restaurant usage, the use of the spa and golf course. As a rule, we request a satellite check-in so our guests do not have to wait in line.

"Some other things to be careful of when booking smaller groups is to make sure the meeting room is not too

large," Caine continues. "Buffets sometimes have a fee attached if you do not meet the number. I try to waive that if at all possible. The beauty of booking smaller groups is you have leeway to become more creative. We tend to use smaller vehicles, and you can offer unique offsite experiences that would not be available to a larger group.

With that in mind, when you are



"We didn't have a large group, but we needed a wide diversity of space for a number of functions."

Ryan Michael Hayes, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Event Management, RedPeg Marketing, Alexandria, VA

looking at offsite tours, you have to be mindful of minimums associated with each. You can always ask that the venue drop the minimum. Finally, while you are negotiating with vendors, you will probably be able to tell who welcomes the small groups. Stick with those suppliers to assure that special experience."

The Trend Is Suburban/Rural

As we've been noticing for several years now, meeting planners with smaller groups have been turning away from the larger, urban properties downtown for the suburban or rural venue that caters to small, corporate groups with more affordability, ease of access and parking, larger guest rooms and the feeling of not being lost in the crowd.

For the small corporate group that wants to mix business with excellent golf, Streamsong Resort, situated in rural Central Florida, south of Orlando, is a luxury meeting and incentive destination designed in harmony with its natural surroundings. Opened in 2013, the 228-room resort property offers one of Florida's most unusual golf experiences on courses designed around a rolling landscape with elevation changes, natural bunkers, lakes and open savannahs. The Streamsong Red and Streamsong Blue

courses were both awarded numerous "Best Course" awards from all the major golf publications. The resort will open a third course, Streamsong Black, this fall.

With 25,000 sf of meeting space, the 13 meeting rooms can accommodate groups of 10–500 in comfort and privacy, within a dedicated area attached to the hotel. Groups are free to explore the property's 16,000 acres, which include

five dining venues, the AcquaPietra Spa, a bass fishing lake, an infinity-edge pool, sporting clays range and hiking trails.

Colorado Adventures

Located in the heart of Vail Village, Colorado, 95 miles west of Denver, the 84-room boutique property, The Sebastian – Vail, offers comprehensive meeting and event facilities complete with luxury resort lodging, including the fine-dining Leonora restaurant. The property is designed to accommodate small corporate meetings and events, offering four flexible meeting rooms, the largest at 3,795 sf for banquet and event space, and the Magellan Boardroom.

"We have 8,500 sf of meeting space. We love groups of about 100 attendees, the perfect size for our corporate meeting and executive retreat spaces," says



Streamsong Resort in rural Central Florida boasts great meeting room views, award-winning golf and outdoor activities such as sporting clays and bass fishing.

Julie Goraj, senior marketing manager, The Sebastian – Vail.

For small corporate groups the property offers a three-night, four-day package beginning with a personalized arrival, transportation from the nearby Vail/Eagle airport if needed and a welcome amenity. Attendees are treated to a dinner reception onsite in a space completely transformed into a cozy, upscale mountain log cabin. Breakfast, meeting time and a gourmet lunch are included, and in the afternoons and evenings, attendees are treated to true Colorado adventures including a guided downhill bike tour down Vail Pass, white-water rafting with a riverside, gourmet candlelit dinner.

Horse Country

Located in Middleburg, Virginia, in beautiful horse and wine country just outside of Washington, DC, the Salamander Resort & Spa is just 22 miles from Dulles International Airport, yet feels like it is a world away. All 168

19,950 sf of indoor and outdoor space throughout the property, with 13 meeting rooms. Some unique indoor venues include the equestrian center (this is horse country after all), the stallion barn

Waterford Room, Bluemont I & II for day three teambuilding, the cooking studio, stallion barn and Delaplane Terrace for dinners, the library for cocktails, Grand Lawn for the fire-pit lunch, Harrimans

“The beauty of booking smaller groups is you have leeway to become more creative.”

Nancy Caine, President
Partners in Planning, Liberty Township, OH

(a 100+ year-old, restored stone building) and a cooking studio.

The property also is the largest destination spa in the Washington, DC, area, and group participants will enjoy the 23,000-sf spa and wellness center with 14 treatment rooms, and an infinity-edge spa pool with cabanas.

“My company’s October annual retreat at Salamander Resort was a mix of a two-day, 12-person executive retreat and then a full-company, one-day, 50-person retreat on the third day,” says Ryan Hayes, director of strategic partnerships and event management at RedPeg Marketing.

“The first two days were pretty typical, with a mix of meetings, brainstorming sessions, meals and some form of a teambuilding activity, which included a ropes course, clay shooting and other activities. Day three was similar, with a series of presentations, meals, one large teambuilding activity, a series of smaller teambuilding activities throughout the resort, and then a happy hour, group dinner and fire-pit gathering. We booked about 30 room nights over three days.

“This event was planned

in a very small booking window of about 10 days, so we truly utilized every available space we could,” says Hayes. “I was very happy with the number of spaces that were available at Salamander. No matter what I needed, there seemed to still be a space that fit our group. Overall we used the property’s Plains Suite, the

each day for breakfast and the Gold Cup public space for another lunch.

“I cannot emphasize how well this all fit our needs. We didn’t have a large group, but we needed a wide diversity of space for a number of functions, and in addition to the meal functions, we also used resort venues for the recreation/teambuilding events (ropes courses, zip lining, biking trails), and for the cidery tours,” says Hayes.

Hayes was careful to explain how planning an annual corporate retreat for a small group of high energy individuals needs a venue that is as dynamic and energetic as the group participants. “We are a young, experiential marketing agency, so our expectations and demands are high when it comes to site selection,” says Hayes. “Since we are in the business of creating experiences for our clients, we desire the same in our corporate outings.

“Salamander provided a true, all-inclusive package of unique experiences. Yes, there’s the basics of meeting and dining space, audio-visual, and quality food and beverage, but we look for that extra touch. We went an hour away from DC for a reason. We could have found the same basic requirements in a dozen other properties in the area, but we wanted something more dynamic, upscale and a property that could create an experience for our employees.”

Wine Country

Another deluxe venue in a non-urban area that welcomes small corporate groups is Willows Lodge, located on five beautifully landscaped acres in the heart of Woodinville wine country, just 25 minutes northeast of Seattle.

The 77-room, seven-suite property is surrounded by more than 90 wineries and tasting rooms, including two of Washington’s largest, Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia Wineries. Willows Lodge sits adjacent to the Redhook Brewery and the Sammamish River Trail, which provides access to plenty of outdoor activities, including biking, kayaking and hiking for small groups. It is also within easy access of several area golf courses, Marymoor Park, shopping centers in nearby Redmond and Bellevue, as well as Eastside businesses, such as Microsoft, Nintendo and Google.

Standard room amenities include 40-inch flat-screen HDTVs (50-inch in suites), four-fixture bathrooms featuring an oversized soaking tub with clear sight line to window, TV and fireplace, complimentary wired and dual 100MB high-speed internet access, and personally stocked private bar,

The Barking Frog, one of the most highly regarded restaurants in the Northwest, as well as the world-renowned Herbfarm, Washington state’s only five-star restaurant, are both located adjacent to the main lodge. The Willows Lodge lobby bar Fireside is open daily. The 2,500-sf Spa at Willows Lodge features a steam room, outdoor hydro-therapy pool, relaxation room and six treatment rooms.

The 45-foot-high ropes course and zip-line park is available and run by Adventura Consulting, with teambuilding skills that encourage improved communications for individuals and organizations. The property offers 5,153 sf of meeting space accommodating groups from 6–180, including the Sammamish Ballroom and the outdoor garden gazebo.

“Last August we chose Willows Lodge to host a gathering of our board of directors,” says Dana Graham, associate director, corporate events for Sage Publishing, a California-based publisher of academic journals, texts and library products for the educational, scholarly and professional markets. “Together

with invited guests, our group consisted of approximately 30 attendees. Prior to our arrival, we worked closely with the team at Willows Lodge to ensure that we maximized all the available space specific to our needs and requirements. In general, our board and senior executives prefer an informal ‘living room’ setting. We have found that this approach consistently yields lively interactive exchanges generally and, in particular, with our guest speakers.”

Willows Lodge seemed to have the right atmosphere for this small corporate group with very specific needs. “We used the Gilman Room for a board dinner, and that same room also served as our ‘living room’ for casual meetings and guest speaker events,” says Graham. “For formal lunches we utilized the Cascade and Cedar rooms, but also frequented the hotel’s Barking Frog restaurant for more informal meals.

“Offsite, several of our guests visited the Chateau St. Michelle Winery, which included a private tour followed by lunch and an offsite visit to Mol-

they personable, knowledgeable, experienced, thoughtful and anticipatory? Will they hold true to their service promise and work alongside of me toward the success of the event? The hotel and staff must be upscale and able to meet or exceed our needs.”

Graham says that in addition to Willows Lodge, the following domestic and international properties, all located outside of big cities, were also outstanding in handling the small, deluxe groups from their U.S. and international offices: Four Seasons Biltmore, Santa Barbara, California; Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons, Oxfordshire, U.K.; Laguna Montage, Laguna, California; and Four Seasons Hampshire, U.K.

For City Locations, Choose Carefully

Many meeting planners prefer an urban destination for their smaller meetings and incentive groups, choosing hotel venues within larger cities that offer more offsite options or closer international air connections. Often it is the

“I look to the team that I will be working with. Are they personable, knowledgeable, experienced, thoughtful and anticipatory?”



Dana Graham, Associate Director, Corporate Events
Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

tenWorks, a locally renowned glass-fusing workshop. Because the property was intimate and cozy, with plenty of places for chatting and networking, it really worked perfectly for our size group, and their onsite chef provided excellent cuisine throughout our stay.

“Generally speaking, we prefer locations located less than two hours from a major airport. Additionally, with smaller groups, in order to achieve our desired relaxed ambience, the site must not exceed 100 rooms, and all meeting rooms should be sufficiently large enough to accommodate our group and feature windows providing natural light,” says Graham.

“Beyond a nice guest room product and varied meeting space, I look to the team that I will be working with. Are

larger, urban property that can provide an all-day food and beverage package, and catering all meals on the property will give planners more power to negotiate and the ability to avoid meeting room rental charges. If planners do not have a large amount of F&B built into the program, using a larger city property will enable attendees to leave the premises and find various food options outside the hotel. You also have to know your group’s preferences, and whether or not the smaller event you are planning will diminish the group’s importance in the minds of the sales staff.

A Perfect Fit in Kansas City

A good choice for a smaller corporate meeting is the 132-room Hotel Sorella Country Club Plaza in Kansas City. Six



Credit: The Sebastian – Vail

The Sebastian – Vail, in the heart of Vail Village, offers comprehensive meeting and event facilities complete with luxury resort lodging.

rooms and suites are extraordinarily spacious, minimum room size is 545 sf, and all guest rooms include a separate relaxation corner, dining table, full-size desk, and outdoor patio or balcony.

Event spaces range from the 4,500-sf Middleburg Ballroom to the intimate Marshall Boardroom, with a total of



Hotel Sorella Country Club Plaza in Kansas City features six private meeting rooms.

private meeting rooms provide 5,700 sf of event space, with a circular flow and a high-ceiling design. Large projector screens offer the opportunity for interesting and informative audio-visual displays, and the prefunction space is situated just off the lobby, under the impressive, three-tiered Murano glass chandeliers.

There is an additional 4,000 sf of event space available in Rosso, the rooftop restaurant, and at the nearby pool terrace and Bar Rosso. Offering a combination of classic Mediterranean and rustic Midwest dining, Rosso provides great views of the city, and the large poolside terrace is perfect for al fresco occasions. Complimentary Wi-Fi is available throughout the property.

"I have organized many corporate events at the Hotel Sorella Country Club Plaza," says Wlaa, a meeting planner and event planner at the Midwest-based Wlaa Style. Wlaa, who uses just his first name, is also a nationally known fashion consultant for modeling agencies and corporate fashion shoots, involved in the travel arrangements for location shoots, and booking accommodations and venues for small meetings and receptions. Some of his recent corporate events have taken place at the Kentucky Derby, TMC Collective Mid-Coast Event, Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week and at NY Fashion Week.

"The Sorella has been perfect for my Midwest clients," Wlaa says. "We make use of the property's Francesa's Greynouse Lounge, as well as their private dining facilities, including the Nichols &

McCoy Ballrooms, the Artist Foyer and the outdoor garden area."

For small, corporate board meetings, or the colorful and extravagant events that Wlaa organizes for his fashion clients, the Hotel Sorella Country Club Plaza offers flexible meeting space and an extensive food and beverage program.

During multiday events at the Sorella, Wlaa coordinates museum and shopping visits in the Kansas City area, and feels that the venue is well-suited to his fashion-conscious clients. "The Sorella is absolutely a perfect fit for us," Wlaa says. "The amazingly helpful and friendly staff created a unique experience through attention to detail, as well as going above and beyond to enable all of the guests to be able to fully enjoy every aspect of the event."

Quiet Luxury in Orlando

In Orlando, the 146-room Villas of Grand Cypress has made a concerted



Villas of Grand Cypress in Orlando offers a newly renovated Executive Meeting Center, bathed in natural light.

effort to target corporate groups of 240 or fewer. Attendees like the fact that the property is within walking distance of their Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course, and that the resort's standard room, at 650 sf, is one of the largest in central Florida.

Offering 10,000 sf of total meeting space, this includes 3,128 sf in the largest room, with a cap of 220 theater style; 240 banquet style; and 160 for classroom setup. One of big attractions at the property is the Executive Meeting Center, a newly renovated 7,200-sf, Mediterra-

nean-style facility, with meeting rooms surrounding an open atrium and overlooking a scenic garden terrace. The four separate meeting rooms can be divided into eight self-contained, soundproof meeting and banquet rooms.

"We use the property once or twice a year for annual conferences; one is a leadership meeting and the other is normally a corporate department meeting, such as human resources or another department," says Cheryl Benjamin, manager, travel and meeting services for Dart Container Corporation. "The attendance for these meetings averages about 60-85 per meeting, and the Villas of Grand Cypress has done a good job with these smaller corporate events — this is our fourth year using the Villas."

"Our meeting schedule is normally fall, September through November, however I have two scheduled for late spring in 2017 and 2018," explains Benjamin. "We utilize the EMC for our meetings and an occasional social function. The layout of

the EMC is great for meetings with breakout sessions; there is lots of natural light but still private, and with just the right amount and right type of space. The pool area is our go-to location for opening receptions. There is enough space there that allows for entertainment and activities during the reception.

"Normally our groups will have a free afternoon, and we work with a DMC in the area to assist with transportation and tickets to the parks or other attractions. The team in the meeting center is experienced and helpful. From sales to billing, I never worry about something falling through the cracks. I don't know how she does it but my conference services and catering manager often seems to know what I need before I do," says Benjamin.

Using a smaller property within a vibrant and busy metropolitan area (like Orlando) can be challenging for meeting planners. Benjamin often prefers to be the only group in-house, which means they get the full attention of the proper-

ty's group managers. "From the minute you pull through the gates, each guest is treated like a returning friend. I feel the longevity of the staff has a lot to do with this. You never pass a person without them waving or saying hello. They do whatever it takes to make us comfortable. This attention helps drive a positive attendee attitude," Benjamin notes.

"The accommodations are what I like to call quiet luxury. Everything is of quality without feeling stuffy or sterile. It doesn't matter if you are in a club suite or a villa, there isn't a bad room at the resort. The setup of the one- to two-bedroom villas can accommodate a small meeting or breakout session (up to eight people) around the dining room table without invading the personal bedroom space. I've had the AV team deliver equipment to a villa to accommodate a pop-up meeting during our leadership conference, and the



"From the minute you pull through the gates, each guest is treated like a returning friend. I feel the longevity of the staff has a lot to do with this."

Cheryl Benjamin, Manager, Travel & Meeting Services
Dart Container Corporation, Mason, MI

clubhouse restaurant (Nine18) is the ideal location for smaller intimate meetings and luncheons. "Nine18 is equipped with blackout screens along with audio-visual capabilities. Benjamin says that her groups generally have an afternoon golf outing, and the services of the golf tournament coordinator at the Villas is invaluable to her.

Benjamin relates a story about how a mistake on her part actually solidified the relationship between the planner and the venue. "One year there was a miscommunication, on Dart's side, to the attendees about lunch on the first day. We planned on lunch for 25 but more people started drifting towards

the dining venue and before we knew it, almost 70 attendees were waiting for lunch," Benjamin says. "I was a little stressed, to say the least, but the hotel's response was 'we will handle it, don't worry, just relax,' and within minutes everyone on the banquet team and in the business office were setting tables and buffet lines. With only a short delay they managed to feed everyone who showed up! Our group still talks about how well they worked under pressure and made us feel like it was just another day. Of course, it's now a standing joke with the resort — they still tease me about the look on my face that day as people kept filing in."

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When local Atlantic City merchants created the "Fall Frolic" in 1921 to promote additional business after Labor Day, little did they realize that the beauty contest would evolve into the highly successful, world-famous Miss America pageant, which helped put Atlantic City and The Boardwalk on the map of world-famous destinations.

Today, after another Atlantic City resurgence engineered by Meet AC, the convention and visitors bureau, professional meeting planners are discovering that Atlantic City offers the best of everything for their meetings and events.

For example, Jennifer Morganti, senior manager of regional marketing and corporate meeting planner at U.S. Foods, says, "Atlantic City has everything that a meeting planner would

need for resources. There is great variety and availability of space, hotel rooms and activities that will fit any event type with any budget."

By Maura Keller

Morganti is a fan of the variety of meeting spaces available in Atlantic City, too. "We like to go to Atlantic City because it affords us the functionality and the space that we require, which can sometimes be very specialized," she says. Each year, U.S. Foods holds its annual Food Fanatics Live event, which features food service innovation, smart business practices and demonstrations. They usually hold the event in late spring or early summer.

Indeed, Atlantic City has something for everybody. It now has a combined room inventory of more than 16,000 rooms, spread out among eight major casino hotels and multiple non-

gaming hotels. Each of the hotels and casino properties has unique meeting and banquet space to accommodate meetings and events of all sizes as well as incomparable water views from the bay to the beachfront.

The three largest include the Borgata Hotels Casino & Spa and the Water Club at Borgata at 2,800 rooms, Harrah's Resort Atlantic City at 2,587 rooms and Tropicana Casino & Resort Atlantic City at 2,129 rooms.

The Future Is Meetings Business

Jim Wood, president and CEO of Meet AC, says, "Atlantic City is a unique destination with the world famous Boardwalk and beaches, dining, shopping, nightlife and entertainment. There is a plethora of options for everyone. Our meeting space is grow-

"Embrace the charm of the city. And pool hop. There are some incredible pools at numerous properties — explore hosting an event at another property's pool to change up the scenery."

Sarah Sebastian
Creative Director, Founder
Rose Gold Collective, Miami, FL



ing and that should express to the meeting/event planners that we want their business.

"The future is very bright for Atlantic City. We are seeing significant growth and demand from the meetings market. Plus the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority is actively engaged in attracting and investing in non-gaming businesses including the soon-to-open Steel Pier Observation Wheel, which will add to the destination's overall appeal."

Karen Shackman agrees. As the founder of Shackman Associates, a leading destination management company based in New York City, she has coordinated many meetings and events in Atlantic City. "I completely believe that the future of Atlantic City is meetings, which explains why Harrah's spent \$134 million in building a spectacular conference center," Shackman says. "The facility provides more than 250,000 sf of event space, with 125,000 sf reserved for meeting space. The center also features two ballrooms, each offering 50,000 sf of space." Shackman also notes that the closed casino resorts were mostly older properties that did not have the modern amenities and décor that today's corporate meeting attendee wants. They also did not have the event facilities that meet the business requirements of meeting planners.

"Meetings are a weekday business, which is huge for a market that relies on weekend business, especially in colder months," Shackman says. "For meetings in warm weather, Atlantic City offers multiple venue options that are outside with beach and ocean views, and is in close proximity to amazing golf options within 30 minutes of any hotel."

Fantastic Venues

Sarah Sebastian, creative director and founder of Rose Gold Collective, an event design company based in Miami, says Atlan-

tic City can be summed up in two simple words: beachfront casino.

"Where else can you find beachfront properties, a boardwalk and large, mega hotels with casinos? Nowhere," Sebastian says. "Atlantic City offers a diverse offering for corporate gatherings from welcome receptions on the beach to large meeting rooms in many hotels. For a group located on the East Coast already, Atlantic City is an easy trip that is drivable, too."

Atlantic City has a plethora of hotels that can handle large meeting and corporate gatherings.

"Embrace the charm of the city," Sebastian says. "And pool hop. There are some incredible pools at numerous properties — explore hosting an event at another property's pool to change up the scenery."

Excellent Service

The resorts and casino hotels that grace Atlantic City go above and beyond to cater to the meeting and events crowd. Just ask Donna Japczynski, meeting planner at Check Point Software Technologies, LTD in San Carlos, California. In September 2016, the company conducted their regional meetings at the Resorts Casino Hotel in Atlantic City to take advantage of their all-inclusive meeting package.

"The Resorts Hotel and entire staff achieved one simple benchmark: excellence," Japczynski says. "We were thoroughly pleased and wholeheartedly recommend."

Kyle Fernley, executive director at Fernley & Fernley Inc., in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, recently held an event for a client at the Tropicana Casino Resort in Atlantic City.

"It was huge for us as we had record attendance," Fernley says. "Everyone enjoyed themselves, and the meeting space was easy to get to. Atlantic City is fun year round, and the city is what you make of it. It's for all walks of life whether you are looking for entertainment or to hit the town with friends."



The Resorts Casino Hotel and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville, which features a 5 O'Clock Somewhere Bar and a casino area that includes 12 Margaritaville-themed table games and 160 slot machines.

Credit: Resorts Casino Hotel

When orchestrating a corporate incentive travel experience, it all comes down to the convention and visitors bureau — Meet AC. "They are so easy to work with and really work with you as a partner," Fernley says. "It's tough to find the best interest at heart these days. Anytime I am looking at Atlantic City, I always take into account not only what I need, but what my clients' wants and needs are and the best location."

Fernley recommends meeting planners take advantage of all that Atlantic City has to offer because there is so much beyond the hotels and casinos, "the beach, The Boardwalk, outdoor bars and restaurants, golf and so much more," he says. "It's your one-stop shop to hold a conference."

Just about a year since its grand opening and perched along the Atlantic City Boardwalk with breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean, Resorts Casino Hotel offers a unique venue for events. Resorts' conference center is an attractively designed, 12,000-sf, technologically advanced facility. It features 12 conference rooms where more than 500 meeting attendees can wirelessly connect devices simultaneously, while sharing screens with each other and even offsite colleagues in remote locations. Each conference room has built-in, 90-inch LED 1080P monitors, and most have cinema-quality DLP projection with oversized drop-down screens. Resorts also has two theaters, offering seating for 300 or 1,350, equipped with state-of-the-art sound and light technology along with four ballrooms of varying sizes.

To appeal to groups of all sizes, Resorts Casino Hotel recently underwent \$100 million in renovations, including the \$35 million Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville-themed entertainment complex, the Resorts Conference Center and, most recently, the completion of phase one of a larger \$25 million room renovation project.

The Resorts Conference Center also boasts the Atlantic Ballroom, home to a spacious multiuse, prefunction area, natural lighting and four sets of operable and divisible walls. The new conference center brings the total meeting space to 64,000 sf with 24 meeting and function rooms.

Meetings Mean Business

Atlantic City's reputation as a serious meetings mecca is growing. The resorts and hotels are improving meeting spaces and expanding to accommodate larger groups. The Tropicana



Credit: Caesars Entertainment

Caesars Atlantic City on The Boardwalk.

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boasts 122,000 sf of event space, which includes 50 individual function rooms, allowing them to accommodate meetings from 10 to 2,000 attendees and 113 8-by-10-foot exhibit booths in the Grand Exposition Center, which is fully carpeted and has an open ceiling, allowing for easy lighting. It boasts 20,000 sf and includes three separate areas that also can be used for parties and catered events. The Tropicana's 18,000-sf, column-free ballroom includes new lighting, carpet, wall coverings and portable walls, and can accommodate a gala event for 1,200 guests or a meeting for 1,800 attendees.

The Top of the Trop, located on the 20th floor of the North Tower, has spectacular views of Atlantic City and is an ideal setting for a cocktail reception. Likewise, the 500-room Havana Tower features more than 37,000 sf of meeting space. The 68th floor offers four well-appointed boardrooms and four hospitality rooms, each affording spectacular views of the Atlantic Ocean. The rooms in the Havana Tower are just an elevator ride from The Quarter, Tropicana's vibrant dining, entertainment, retail and spa complex.

The Tropicana also offers 24 restaurants and eateries including both casual and gourmet restaurants. They have six restaurants onsite that cater to group events with private dining space, too.

Long celebrated for its lavishness and grandeur, Caesars Atlantic City has 28,000 sf of stunning meeting and event facilities



Credit: Caesars Entertainment

Harrah's Atlantic City Waterfront Conference Center recently opened to rave reviews.

rooms, the center can accommodate up to 5,000 attendees. In addition, Harrah's offers more than 2,500 hotel rooms directly accessible from the meeting space, making it the perfect year-round destination where attendees can eat, sleep and meet all in one location.

Harrah's recently announced plans for a \$30 million guest room and suite renovation set for completion in summer 2017. The room and suite upgrades are part of Caesars Entertainment's total investment of \$200 million into its Atlantic City casino resorts, which also includes future enhancements to Harrah's premier nightlife destination, The Pool After Dark, the resort's fitness center and its upscale food court.

The Atlantic City Convention Center provides 486,600 sf of contiguous exhibit space, as well as 45 meeting rooms featuring an extra 109,100 sf, ample prefunction space, and all the amenities you would expect in a high-end convention venue.

For a more historic convention experience, Atlantic City's classic Boardwalk Hall, home to the annual Miss America pageant, is a multipurpose facility located on the iconic Boardwalk and features a 141,000-sf main arena with a capacity of 14,770 seats as well as the 23,100-sf Adrian Phillips Ballroom with a capacity of 3,200 guests.

For 85 years, Boardwalk Hall has been "wowing" guests with thousands of spectacular shows, concerts and events. In 2001, a \$90 million restoration project was completed to transform the original convention hall into a modern special events arena for hosting concerts, sporting events and family shows.

Activities & Dining Aplenty

Dining. The Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa offers a wide array of group dining from world-renowned chefs, including Wolfgang Puck (Wolfgang Puck American Grille), Bobby Flay (Bobby Flay Steak), Michael Schulson (Izakaya Modern Japanese Pub), Geoffrey Zakarian (The Water Club), and restaurateurs Greg and Marc Sherry (Old Homestead Steak House). Now that the Borgata has announced the unveiling of its 18,000-sf Central Conference Center debuting in May, the project will provide an exclusive meeting experience as well as an expanded culinary program helmed by executive chef Tom Biglan (Borgata Buffet, The Metropolitan, Bread + Butter, Noodles of The World) along with pastry chef Thaddeus DuBois (Borgata Baking Company, Borgata Buffet, The Metropolitan, Bread + Butter) who will oversee the pastry program.

Non-Gaming Activities. While casino activities offer a wealth



Credit: Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa

Premier, the new nightclub at Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa, was designed as a theatrical experience for partygoers.

that can accommodate groups of all sizes. The 17,135-sf Palladium Ballroom is an elegant venue with generous prefunction space. For more intimate engagements, the resort's 10 individual meeting rooms range in size from 490 sf to 1,262 sf and can be combined to accommodate large meetings.

Harrah's Atlantic City, a Caesars Entertainment Corporation resort, built the world-class Waterfront Conference Center, which is now the largest convention center-hotel complex from Baltimore to Boston. Featuring two, divisible 50,000-sf ball-

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Credit: Tropicana Atlantic City

The Trop's multimedia show features a 66-foot-high curved LED screen surrounded by five double-sided 24-foot LED screens with moving spot lights reaching deep into the sky.

of entertainment options, hosting a meeting at many of the hotels and casinos within Atlantic City offers attendees who aren't interested in gaming so much more to do after a long day of meetings.

For instance, Tropicana Atlantic City offers a plethora of non-gaming amenities including the state-of-the-art AtlantiCare LifeCenter Fitness, which is a great way to start the day. In addition, the resort's Escape AC is a 60-minute, live action, team-based game that guests always enjoy. Essentially it is where Clue meets Beat-the-Clock in this live action, team-based game that challenges groups of two to 10 people to "escape" a designated room in 60 minutes. Each game room provides a thrilling, yet challenging experience that requires attention to detail, critical thinking, communication and teamwork. Executives can watch and assess through the corporate viewing room to see how their group members work together in their attempt to escape the room.

The Steel Pier is currently under construction developing a 200-foot-high observation wheel, which will offer riders sweeping views of the ocean and the Atlantic City skyline from inside the climate-controlled gondolas. This \$14 million project is scheduled to open in mid-2017.

Stimulating Your Senses. Additionally, five new and improved multimedia light and sound shows have debuted on The Boardwalk, playing nightly every half hour beginning at dusk. And Tropicana is taking their multimedia light and sound show to a whole new level by partnering with the world-famous Moment Factory. The result is an even more immersive experience featuring sound and lighting and mind-blowing visuals. These free, daily high-energy shows begin at dusk.

Shop 'Til You Drop. In the heart of Atlantic City's tourism district is the premier outlet shopping — Tanger Outlets – The Walk, which consists of more than 100 retail stores. Best of all, Atlantic City offers shoppers tax-free shopping on clothing and shoes. In addition, The Playground shopping and entertainment complex includes exclusive retail shops such as Gucci, Apple, L'Occitane and Burberry.

Arts & Culture. Atlantic City also has a growing arts and culture scene including numerous festivals and events during the year including Big Name Beach Concerts, Atlantic City Cider

Social, Atlantic City Seafood Festival, Atlantic City Beer and Music Festival, Insane Inflatable 5k, The Color Run and The Annual Atlantic City Airshow.

New & Noteworthy

Whether you are looking for a glamorous high-end hotel or a more relaxed venue that caters to groups of all sizes, Atlantic City offers a wealth of hotel and venue options. What's more, the historic city is constantly reinventing itself with updates and upgrades aplenty.

The Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa announced the unveiling of its new 18,000-sf Central Conference Center coming this May.

The addition gives Borgata more than 106,000 sf of meeting, event and convention space among its three unique venues: The Event Center at 70,000 sf, The Water Club at 18,000 sf and the new Central Conference Center at 18,000 sf. The Central Conference Center features two stories of customizable event space including five meeting rooms, a boardroom and an office on the lower level; as well as a 6,500-sf clear-span ballroom on the upper level.

The bi-level venue boasts the latest in technology, offering HD digital projection, TV and internet system capabilities paired with all-digital distributed sound systems. Touch panel controls and décor lighting allow for made-to-order services that can be uniquely individualized to fit any need.

Additional new projects include an outdoor pool and beer garden and a new eatery, which debuted in summer 2016. The 3,200-sf pool can be used for swimming during the day and as an entertainment gathering spot at night. The Borgata's projects also include Premier, a new nightclub that was designed as "a theatrical experience for partygoers" and competes against blockbuster clubs in Las Vegas, New York and Miami. Tiered booths tilt toward a DJ station, stage and "digital proscenium." Carved-stone bars flank the main room, with a horseshoe-shaped mezzanine and a huge digitally programmable chandelier overhead. In addition, celebrity chef Michael Symon's new restaurant Angeline is set to open in spring 2017.

In other news, The Claridge hotel reopened in 2014 as a fully restored historic hotel with 483 renovated guest rooms. Now a Radisson hotel, The Claridge debuted additional conference space, adding 15,000 sf to meet the growing demand for conference space throughout Atlantic City. This brings Claridge's conference space to 100,000 sf, including a 6,400-sf room perfect for general sessions or small trade shows and four smaller conference and board rooms.

Another historic Boardwalk venue the Showboat Atlantic City underwent a dramatic renovation and now offers 872 spacious, well-appointed guest rooms and suites, three restaurants, and convenient access to all the best attractions that Atlantic City has to offer.

And the former casino hotel Revel, now named TEN, will be celebrating its grand reopening in 2017. The newly rebranded and renovated property, situated on the beach, will feature 13 restaurants, a 32,000-sf spa, 55,000 sf of retail space and a parking garage with more than 7,000 spaces. **C&IT**

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California

The Golden State's Diversity of Destinations Shines

The Golden State is the pulsing heart of the movie and tech industries, global trendsetter in culture and politics and celebrated for its wealth of bucket-list adventures. It's the third largest state and hugely diverse, culturally and geographically. If planners can't find a destination here to meet their group's needs, they aren't looking hard enough.

By Christine Loomis

Anaheim

In Orange County, Anaheim is a destination where serious business and fun intersect.

Jay Burress, president and CEO of Visit Anaheim, points to dozens of other attributes that make Anaheim a great choice for planners. "The destination is known for its exceptional hospitality community and close synergy between Visit Anaheim, the Anaheim Convention Center and local hotels," he says. We're really proud of our unique relationship and the way it translates over to planners by easily conducting business across key hospitality organizations."

He notes that 300-plus days of sunshine, four nearby airports, the West's largest convention center and 9,000 hotel rooms within 1/5 mile of the convention center contribute to Anaheim's meeting friendliness, along with the area's famed theme parks and beaches. It's what makes Anaheim, says Burress, "the epicenter of SoCal."

Meeting business growth currently comes from two sectors. "Growth in the Asia-Pacific region MICE market, particularly China, Australia and New Zealand, is a trend that we've been keeping a close eye on," Burress says. "We're investing heavily into that market, bringing a dedicated MICE sales rep in China and joining ICCA to promote and sell Anaheim to the international MICE Market."

"Corporate groups have also grown exponentially," he continues, "thanks in part to the upcoming Anaheim Convention Center expansion, which adds 200,000 sf of flexible space. Planners can build any experience within this space, from large ga-

"The city of Anaheim has evolved dramatically. It's almost unrecognizable if you haven't been here in the last five years."

Jay Burress
President and CEO
Visit Anaheim



las and presentations to small educational breakout sessions. It's really a blank slate to create any customized event."

He calls the Anaheim campus the best campus setup in the country. "The convention center is surrounded by numerous major, full-service hotels that flank an al fresco function space, providing a self-contained, walkable campus." The center gives groups a place to gather in "a single high-profile location with nightly views of world-famous fireworks and everything else the Anaheim Resort has to offer."

With approximately \$6 billion in investment happening or coming online, including luxury hotels, mixed-use developments and new attractions at Disneyland Park, there's a lot for planners to see.

"The city of Anaheim has evolved dramatically," Burress concludes. "It's almost unrecognizable if you haven't been here in the last five years. From hotel development and beautification projects to the burgeoning epicurean and brewery scene as well as our ever-evolving attractions, we encourage a site visit to see the possibilities."

Irvine

Another Orange County city, Irvine sits inland from Newport Beach and Laguna Beach. Gina Viña, director of global events with ConferenceDirect, says the city has a multitude of attributes. In October, she assisted one of her clients, the Center for Research on Biotxin-Associated Illness Inc., which met at Hotel Irvine, drawing 140 attendees.

"Irvine offers many wonderful options to meeting attendees," Viña says. "Warm weather, plenty of dining experiences and entertainment are available within minutes. Airlift is easy because attendees can use the John Wayne Airport, which offers quick access, or LAX, which offers numerous direct-flight options, especially for international travelers."

It's the people, though, that shine. "Irvine is a great city to do business with. There are great hotel options and a fantastic CVB, Destination Irvine," Viña says. "Staff members at Destination Irvine are valuable partners and can provide support and expertise to ensure your event is successful. I really enjoyed working with them."

Hotel Irvine, with a "convenient location, recent renovation, easy airport access, excellent F&B and service and an amazing staff" proved to be an excellent venue. "It started with the sales process and Mark Eastman," Viña says. "Mark was professional and listened to what our needs were and provided the best solution at a competitive price. However, I believe a great team starts with great leadership and General Manager Jeroen Quint is outstanding. He has a passion for service excellence and it's clear he imparts this to his staff."

Viña also has high praise for Tricia Smith, senior event services manager who has been with the hotel for over 25 years, as well as Josh Cameron, director of the AV team.

She calls the meeting space "fresh and crisp with good lighting," noting that most is just off the lobby, thus easy to access. "The only space a little removed is the Pavilion," she says, "but it's a 2.5-minute walk from the main ballroom along a charming outdoor area. I thought it was nice for attendees to get some fresh air and enjoy the California sunshine."

Viña's advice for planners considering Irvine: "Partner with Destination Irvine."

Long Beach

Sometimes, the best destination for a conference is right at home. Tala Baltazar, director, global events and sales enablement for Laserfiche, headquartered in Long Beach, says the city is perfect for the company's Empower Conference of 3,000 attendees. The event was held in Long Beach in January 2016 and February 2017.

"The Laserfiche Empower Conference is the premier educa-



The 2016 Laserfiche Empower Conference was held at the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center.

tional and networking event for the Laserfiche community and professionals who want to learn ways to improve efficiency and transform their business. It's important for us to select a venue that sets a stage conducive to learning and networking. The city of Long Beach is a smart choice," she says. "We are able to maintain our strong sense of community among our thousands of attendees. Hotels are within walking distance from the convention center. Long Beach is truly a convention-friendly city. The waterfront location and many options for shopping, dining and entertainment are a plus. Overall, it's about the brand experience, and we know our attendees will have a great time at our event in Long Beach. Additionally, it's wonderful to kick off our year with an event in sunny Southern California, at a waterfront setting."

Baltazar says several Long Beach "watering holes" were designated for attendee networking after meetings. "It was easily arranged; attendees just show their badges, and they get a discount for food and drinks."

For past conferences, the group also held events at the Queen Mary and Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific. "These



"Long Beach is truly a convention-friendly city."

Tala Baltazar, Director, Global Events and Sales Enablement
Laserfiche, Long Beach, CA

venues and others provide unique types of experiences for convention attendees," Baltazar says.

For meeting sessions, Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center is ideal. "Besides the proximity of its location to our headquarter office, the center's space fulfilled our requirements for our keynotes, 250-plus breakout sessions, exhibits and meal functions. The layout and room-naming convention are logical such that attendees can easily figure out where to go. There are so many function spaces that can be used and transformed from one type of function to another. Cost was another consideration. Housing, meals, even parking fees were reasonably priced. We also love the Pacific Room; it's a flexible

“Staff members at Destination Irvine...can provide support and expertise to ensure your event is successful.”

Gina Vina, CHSE, Dir. of Global Events
ConferenceDirect, Austin, TX



In addition to using space at Los Angeles Convention Center, there will be multiple individual receptions and events in different venues. “We’ll host about six receptions for 75–600 people for our regional receptions,” Heppe says. “In addition, we will host our global award recipients for our Annual Global Awards Photos and Reception, followed by 12 regional dinners at locations throughout downtown. The options are endless, which is extremely rare!”

While Heppe notes that so many options can be challenging, she says the process has been generally easy for a couple of reasons. “The rebirth of L.A. offers many exciting venues and eclectic food options,” so she has found exactly what she needs. And the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board has been there to help. “The L.A. Tourism team members are extremely knowledgeable and have gone out of their way to understand the program and provide options exceeding my expectations.”

Heppe says the city’s extensive variety of lodging also makes housing easier. “We have multiple sub blocks based on region. But the variety of service levels, price points and room-block availability was extremely easy for us in planning.”

For planners considering L.A., Heppe says, “Downtown L.A. can be intimidating. Reach out to the L.A. Tourism team when you begin planning. Spend time with them to explain your program, and they’ll offer suggestions to help you navigate through the many options. Take the time to site visit the different venues as there is so much to see — but you will definitely find the right fit.”

Marina del Rey

Offering an intimate seaside location, Marina del Rey is just four miles from LAX. Jennifer Squillace, manager, global accounts with HelmsBriscoe, works with a luxury automotive group that meets frequently in California.

“This client held over 20 meetings, close to 6,000 room nights, in California in 2016. Among the reasons they love California,” she says, “are the great weather and natural beauty along the coast. This is the perfect combination for driving tours.”

Squillace worked with the group on two meetings in fall 2016, drawing 25 and 100 attendees, respectively. “Marina del Rey was chosen as the ideal location because of the high quality hotels and restaurants available, the relaxed but upscale atmosphere and the proximity to LAX.”

The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey and Marina del Rey Marriott met the group’s requirements for upscale lodging and had the pattern available for their meetings. “The proximity to the ma-



“Marina del Rey should definitely be considered as an option. It’s about 20 minutes from LAX.”

Jennifer Squillace, Manager
Global Accounts
HelmsBriscoe, Atlanta, GA

rina offered easy access to restaurants and activities,” Squillace says, adding, “The Ritz-Carlton made the planning and execution of the event easy and seamless.

Squillace recommends that planners partner with CVBs in Los Angeles County and says, “Marina del Rey should definitely be considered as an option. It’s about 20 minutes from LAX and easily accessible from many areas of the city.”

San Diego

The Conference Board, a global, independent business membership and research organization working in the public interest, has set its own annual employee health care conference in New York and San Diego for 17 years. Last March, approximately 600 employees attended the San Diego conference.

“San Diego is the perfect location for this meeting due to the mild weather in March, the proximity of the airport to the city’s downtown area, direct flights from major hubs and the convenience of having great restaurants and entertainment for our attendees close to the hotel,” says Tereza Todorova, CMP, senior meeting planner. “Also, since San Diego is such a tourist destination, many of our attendees extend their stay a few days to enjoy the beach, the famous zoo, great golf courses, entertainment parks, shops, restaurants, boat rides, etc.”

For the last four years, the group has used the Hilton San Diego Bayfront. “Its great location on the water, proximity to the airport, spacious meeting space, the luxury of outdoor



The historic Gaslamp Quarter in the heart of downtown San Diego.

space for lunches and receptions, beautiful and clean sleeping rooms, creative catering options, fresh and tasty banquet food and amazing service provided by the conference services team, reservations, banquets, housekeeping, etc., make this property the perfect hotel for any size meeting,” Todorova says. “I highly recommend it.”

But among the city’s attributes, Todorova notes, is choice of lodging options. “San Diego has a variety of hotels suitable for any group size: resort hotels, convention hotels, conference centers, etc. As our Employee Health Care Conference continued to grow through the years, we were able to find a new home for it and return to San Diego every year. A city with such options is a great destination for every meeting planner.”

If there is a downside to San Diego, it’s only its popularity. “Book as much in advance as possible,” Todorova says, “as space and dates seem to get taken very quickly!”



Credit: San Francisco Travel

The San Francisco skyline at dusk.

and collaboration were extremely beneficial in the conference-planning process.”

Baltazar believes if planners visit downtown Long Beach, choosing to meet there will be an easy choice. “If you can, attend an event at the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center so you can envision your event through the eyes of your attendees. You’ll know they’ll have a good experience. You’ll also discover how easy it is to imagine your event at this setting, and how easy it will be to make it happen.”

Los Angeles

When events require a truly “wow” destination, L.A. is often on the short list. That was the case for Harley-Davidson’s 2017 annual Dealer Meeting, coming up in August with approximately 6,000 attendees. Amy Heppe, event manager, is in the planning process for the L.A. meeting now.

“The redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles provides the perfect combination of logistical ease, meeting space, event space, hotel space, entertainment options and the wow we look for in a destination,” she says.

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Credit: Marina del Rey CVB

Marina del Rey offers upscale event options in a seaside location.

What's New & Noteworthy

California has so many cities, towns, attractions, hotels and convention centers, there's always something new to discover.

San Francisco. While the Moscone Convention Center undergoes a massive renovation to increase its size to 772,179 sf of usable space (scheduled for completion in 2018), hotels in the city have partnered to provide planners with Neighborhood Network Connections for meetings of up to 2,500. Near Moscone, InterContinental San Francisco and San Francisco Marriott Marquis jointly provide 1,400 guest rooms and 160,000 sf of function space. In Union Square, Grand Hyatt San Francisco and The Westin St. Francis provide 1,200 guest rooms and 86,000 sf of space. There are Nob Hill, Downtown and SOMA neighborhood networks, too. Self-contained conferences — those with lodging and venues in the same building — rose 47 percent in the past year, so book as far ahead as possible.

Monterey County. Arguably the most significant project for 2017 is the renovation and opening of the new, state-of-the-art Monterey Conference Center this spring, with 40,000-plus sf of LEED-certified flexible space accommodating up to 3,200 attendees. In addition, Hyatt Carmel Highlands, celebrating 100 years of coastal hospitality this year, has renovated its guest rooms, lobby and other public spaces.

San Diego. Kimpton Hotel La Jolla was rebranded as Hotel La Jolla, Curio Collection by Hilton. In July, Hilton Garden Inn and Homewood Suites opened a joint campus, easily accessible from the airport. Pendry San Diego by Montage Hotels & Resorts opens this month in the Gaslamp Quarter with 35,000 sf of function space. Harrah's Resort Southern California will launch four new high-tech meeting rooms this winter and unveil its new spa renovation in May.

Both Legoland California Resort and Sea World San Diego

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“The redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles provides the perfect combination of logistical ease, meeting space, event space, hotel space, entertainment options and the wow we look for in a destination.”

Amy Heppe, CIS, Event Manager
Harley-Davidson, Milwaukee, WI

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will launch new attractions in 2017. Legoland's Star Wars Mini-land opens in March, SeaWorld's Ocean Explorer comes on-line late spring.

Dana Point. In June, Dana Point launched its own CVB, Visit Dana Point, giving meeting planners a one-stop resource for the town, which offers four luxury resorts, 1,370 guest rooms, 59 meeting rooms and 16 restaurants, along with beaches, golf, spas and whale watching. Six major airports are within 100 miles of town, making access a breeze.

Newport Beach. Newport Beach turned 110 in 2016. Among its attractions for planners and groups: sailboat rentals via Newport Beach Sailing School, scenic helicopter tours with OC Helicopters and golf at The Resort at Pelican Hill.

Long Beach. In spring 2017, Long Beach Convention Center will open its newest turnkey meeting space The Cove. Providing an “under-the-pier” fantasy aesthetic, the new space is located below the Terrace Theater. Additionally, a new pedestrian bridge The Wave will connect the center's Pine Avenue entrance with Terrace Place, The Cove and the arena.



Credit: Fairmont Century Plaza

The landmark Century Plaza Hotel, undergoing extensive restoration, will re-open as the Fairmont Century Plaza, Los Angeles in 2018.

Marina del Rey. Following a 2016 renovation of its guest rooms, The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey completed a renovation of its Marine Vista Room in January, offering fabulous views and a prime location. In December, the Marina del Rey CVB launched The Free Ride, a fleet of five electric shuttles providing free transportation to attractions within the marina, including six hotels, many restaurants, Fisherman's Village and Waterside mall. Some shuttles also travel to neighbor Venice Beach.

Los Angeles. Los Angeles County will add more than 8,700 new hotel rooms by 2018. Dream Hollywood Hotel will open in February with 179 upscale rooms, and a rooftop pool and lounge. The James Hotel Los Angeles opens in April, with 286 rooms and 10,000 sf of meeting space. When the InterContinental Los Angeles Downtown opens in June, it will be the tallest building west of Chicago and include a sky-lobby on the 70th floor. The landmark Century Plaza Hotel, undergoing extensive restoration, will re-open as the Fairmont Century Plaza, Los Angeles in 2018.

C&IT



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Attendees of the Natural Products Expo West welcomed the warm Southern California morning with a sun salutation during a yoga class on March 11, 2016, in the Grand Plaza in front of the Anaheim Convention Center.

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Destination

Colorado

Meeting a Mile High — and Higher

By Christine Loomis

Rock climbing teambuilding programs are a big hit in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.



Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs and a slew of famous mountain towns have long drawn planners and attendees to the Centennial State.

It's hard to beat the Mile High City as a meetings destination with its nationally and globally recognized restaurants, breweries, arts, nightlife and surrounding trendy neighborhoods. Downtown is home to the Colorado Convention Center, multiple meeting-friendly hotels, major sports arenas and stadiums, and Denver's transportation and lifestyle hub, Union Station.

Over the past 10 years the city has generated record tourism numbers, including a 2016 increase of one million visitors over 2015. And those visitors translated into \$5 billion in spending in Denver. Richard Scharf, president and CEO of Visit Denver, the city's CVB, says the record tourism numbers "validate Denver voter approval to increase tourism marketing dollars back in 2005. Since that increase," he adds, "Denver has seen dramatic tourism growth that translates into greater economic impact for the city."

No surprise, then, that Denver is No. 11 on the Forbes 2016 list of America's 20 Fastest Growing Cities. That kind of growth generates a lot of positives, including new and improved infrastructure and more options in terms of hotels, restaurants, amenities and activities for planners and their groups. And even though business travel was flat nationally in 2015, in Denver it was up 9 percent, proving that the city has drawing power for the business market.

Still, Denver is not Colorado's only stellar meetings destination.

The names Aspen, Vail and Breckenridge have a cachet all

their own and attract attendees from across the globe — not just for winter sports but for a wealth of summer activities and cultural events, too.

Urban Meetings

One name that might not be so familiar is Aurora, Colorado, just east of downtown Denver and directly south of Denver International Airport. But if meeting-goers don't know the name now, they soon will.

The Anschutz Medical Campus helped to launch Aurora's transformation and drive an expansion of ancillary businesses. In April, Hyatt Regency Aurora-Denver Conference Center, a mile from the medical campus, opened with 249 rooms and 30,000 sf of meeting and function space. Additionally, the 1,500-room Gaylord Rockies Resort & Conference Center will open in Aurora in late 2018, becoming the state's largest hotel.

In May, Steffani G. Blackstock, CMP, president of Ascent Meetings & Management in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, brought 400 attendees to the Hyatt Regency Aurora-Denver Conference Center for a collaborative learning session.

"The proximity of the hotel to the client's headquarters was the biggest factor in choosing the hotel, in addition to the configuration and square footage of meeting space," Blackstock says. "And for a budget-conscious client with high-class demands, a pre-opening special is a great way to maximize value and establish a model for future business."

Because hers was the first large group to hold a conference at the hotel, Blackstock says, "There was a buzz of excitement all about the place. All of the hotel staff wore big smiles

and were exceptionally friendly and helpful; they made us feel very welcome."

Even before the event, she knew she was in good hands with Kerri Pinkney, a sales manager, and Laura Carnahan Dole, an event services manager. "I have a solid working relationship with both in producing events at other hotel properties over the years," Blackstock notes, "and I know them to be creative, attentive and fair in our dealings...they go the extra mile."

About the hotel she says, "The meeting space flows nicely and is all on one floor — the ballroom for general sessions and nine breakout rooms — with natural light from skylights in the spacious prefunction areas and seating clusters for informal conversation and networking. These features were highly suited for this particular program. Additionally, the Borealis restaurant/lounge was a nice place to hang out, with movable glass walls that allow flow onto the patio areas with couch seating and fireplaces to enjoy a Colorado evening outdoors."

On the downside, restrooms near the ballroom were not well marked and women's restrooms near the breakout rooms reached capacity very quickly, creating long lines. And though Blackstock appreciated the break stations set on "lovely built-in cabinets," as well as continuous coffee and a refrigerator with self-serve bottled water, she ultimately had to request added food and beverage stations because during session transitions those one-sided stations created bottlenecks for attendees.

Of course, she knew there were bound to be hiccups with a brand-new hotel. "We watched the physical construction of the property and took a hardhat tour during the finishing stages, but we had never seriously considered how much time and effort it takes to build the infrastructure. The overlapping systems within a hotel — technology, maintenance, food/beverage, reservations, accounting — require a lot of training and practice for staff to learn and perfect the skills. We experienced a few challenges in the behind-the-scenes planning and execution, but most of our attendees were unaware and post-event evaluations were very favorable of the hotel."

To planners considering meeting in a brand-new property, Blackstock offers this advice: "Schedule a pre-event walkthrough with the hotel's key team members (banquets, AV, etc.) at least one week prior to the event. This will help them to envision how a group will use the space and can help to anticipate problems with flow, signage, etc."

The Renaissance Denver Downtown City Center Hotel opened in 2014 in the meticulously renovated Colorado Bank Building. The mix of preserved historic detail and upscale contemporary aesthetic has attracted meeting planners and groups ever since, including Susan L. Schaefer-Batzold, director

of corporate travel for Optiv Security in Overland Park, Kansas, which provides a full suite of information security services and solutions. Schaefer-Batzold books multiple meetings at the Renaissance throughout the year, with attendees numbering from 20 to 700. The hotel is a good fit as it's located near Optiv's Denver headquarters and the meeting space stands out.

"I love the fact that some rooms already have monitors, which saves on AV expense. I love the menus offered for meetings, they are unique," Schaefer-Batzold says. "And the meeting space is unique, too, as each room is different."

That's because the meeting space utilizes the old bank vaults, providing one-of-a-kind spaces with architectural interest. Schaefer-Batzold also likes that an upstairs space — the Club Lounge on the mezzanine level overlooking the lobby — can be used on a complimentary, first-come, first-serve basis, "which is another added bonus and cost saver."

The Renaissance also has other elements going for it. "This hotel is a great option, rooms are very nice and comfortable. It's a Marriott property and points are typically a big deal. The sales staff is wonderful to work with. They make me look good, and they read my mind," Schaefer-Batzold says. "It doesn't get much better than that!"

When the groups range from 20 to 60 attendees, Optiv uses the Renaissance for its primary meeting space. "The consistency of food quality, the location and excellent service makes it a go-to option every time," Schaefer-Batzold says. And while they have had team dinners in the hotel, she notes that, "Typically we like to take our folks offsite after a long day of meetings."

That's where the city comes in. "Everything is pretty much walking distance in Denver, and the weather is great," Schaefer-Batzold notes. "This helps with transportation costs, and it's great exercise."

And though Optiv has a Denver headquarters, many attendees fly in from elsewhere. "Denver is an easy city to find nonstop flights in and out of and at a good price in most cases," Schaefer-Batzold adds. "Plus, the addition of the light rail to and from the airport is a bonus."

The only real challenge for Schaefer-Batzold is something over which she has no control: the natural dryness of Colorado. "It's really hard on you if you are not constantly drinking water," she says. "Other than that, it's great."

Also in the heart of downtown, The Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center is an excellent choice for larger groups. Jeff Wood, vice president/general manager, HP Workstation/Thin Client Global Business Unit in Fort Collins, Colorado, set the annual internal sales training event for 1,000 at the Hyatt Regency for exactly that reason. "It gave us the ability to host all of our attendees in one hotel."

"Schedule a pre-event walkthrough with the hotel's key team members... at least one week prior to the event. This will help them to envision how a group will use the space and can help to anticipate problems with flow, signage, etc."

Steffani G. Blackstock, CMP, President
Ascent Meetings & Management, Highlands Ranch, CO

But it's not just about the space. "The Hyatt staff is very accommodating of the complexities of our event. They do a fantastic job of catering to our food and beverage and meeting-space requirements," Wood says. He advises planners to take advantage of that expertise. "They are very accommodating, professional and help us put on a great event!"

The group uses the hotel for the welcome reception and senior management meetings. "We host our partner-sponsored welcome reception at the hotel," Wood notes. "Since half of our attendees are flying in from outside the United States, it's convenient for them after a full day of travel to relax in the hotel and not have to navigate their way to other venues. The Hyatt does a fantastic job of catering our event and meeting the needs of international guests."

Other main stage and breakout meeting requirements are managed at the Colorado Convention Center. "The convenience of the hotel to the convention center is ideal as the weather in December in Colorado can be d'icy (pun intended)."

Hosting the meeting in Denver is convenient in terms of HP's global business. "Our worldwide headquarters are in Fort Collins, a short hour drive to the Hyatt," Wood notes. "It gives us the ability to host a greater number of our employees at the event vs. traveling to alternate locations."

The meeting usually includes two open nights where attendees go where they want for dinner, but they primarily use venues along the 16th Street Mall within walking distance of the hotel. "We don't venture farther than that into the city," Wood acknowledges.

With the event going on 13 years, Wood says, "I think we have the process nailed by now." The only complications are due to weather in December, which can impact travel in and out of the airport and the city. But then there's what Wood sees as the highlight: "Colorado — it's God's country."

Mountain Meetings

Colorado has no lack of idyllic mountain towns that accommodate meetings and incentive trips, including Vail, Beaver Creek, Keystone and Breckenridge. Vail Resorts is a key player in these four towns and ready to assist planners with whatever they need.

"Everything is pretty much walking distance in Denver, and the weather is great. This helps with transportation costs, and it's great exercise."

Susan L. Schaefer-Batzold, Director of Corporate Travel, Optiv Security, Overland Park, KS

In Breckenridge, a premier resort to consider is One Ski Hill Place, a RockResort, located at the base of Peak 8 where a gondola provides access to the town of Breckenridge below. That's where Springfield, Virginia-based Seertech Solutions America



Credits: Seertech Solutions America

held its annual retreat and strategy meeting in June, with seven team members as well as their families in attendance.

Ken Goldwasser, director, learning solutions, says the location was ideal, and he received excellent assistance from Vail Resorts. "We explained our needs — a combination of work, teambuilding and fun for staff and families — and they matched us with the best available location. I highly recommend letting them know your requirements so they can explain available options," he says. "The Vail Resorts team was very active in providing information to facilitate the booking of accommodations and meeting rooms, and seeing that all was in order when we were onsite."

One Ski Hill Place served as the primary meetings venue. "We like the convenience of staying and meeting in the same building, avoiding any commute time. A simple elevator descent and you are at your meeting site," Goldwasser says. "Our meeting room had plenty of windows to allow in natural light and take advantage of the mountain location. Breakfast and lunch were set up outside the room, which provided a nice way to assure we had to get up for a break and so that the food prep and wonderful smell were not a distraction from the meeting. The room had excellent Wi-Fi and met our needs perfectly."

The hotel was also the setting for a dinner function for staff and family, a group of 30. "We appreciated that catering accommodated our mix of adults and children as well as prepared a vegetarian meal for one guest," Goldwasser says. "There were plenty of menu items for us to choose from when determining what to serve and the style. We went with a buffet."

The town of Breckenridge, which sits at a heady 9,600 feet above sea level, also proved ideal. "Breckenridge offers so many options for group and individual activities. This was key



Attendees from the Seertech Solutions America retreat participated on a team hike while another group rented mountain bikes.

for a group like ours spanning ages from young children to adults," Goldwasser notes. "We were able to organize activities for the group, and each family also found plenty to do on their own. The free shuttle into town was convenient and efficient. The gondolas also provided a unique transportation option. The town is full of great restaurants and bars, places for children and adults and all tastes and dietary requirements."

The group enjoyed activities together and separately. "In addition to a team hike on the trail to Frisco, our group split up for some activities and meals," Goldwasser says. "Families enjoyed the Breck Fun Park while other attendees rented mountain bikes and rode the lift to access trails or rode into town. Downstairs at Eric's was a popular restaurant for lunch and dinner, and a stop at the Broken Compass Brewery was a hit."

To be sure, there are some extra things to consider when you hold a meeting in a mountain town. "If some of your guests are from lower altitudes, be sure to prepare them to hydrate and to bring and use sunscreen," Goldwasser says. "Don't plan activities, such as hiking and biking, without considering breaks to allow guests to catch their breath."

Although the outdoors is definitely a highlight of meeting in the mountains, that doesn't mean everyone has to be a hardcore adventurer. Goldwasser points out that, "The trail system in and around Breckenridge is not too strenuous, follows the Blue River and accommodates those who want dirt under their feet or tires, as well as those who prefer pavement. And," he adds, "there are opportunities to do things outside of town, too, such as rafting and hot air balloon rides."

Like other mountain towns, Breckenridge should be on planners' destination short lists for a multitude of reasons. "It's a beautiful mountain location with plenty of activities for all ages, not too crowded and has excellent accommodations and attentive staff," says Goldwasser.

What's New in Colorado

This is a state where cities and towns across the board evolve and update to stay at the top of their game. There's always something new to engage attendees.

In March, The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs opened The

"Breckenridge is a beautiful mountain location with plenty of activities for all ages, not too crowded and has excellent accommodations and attentive staff."

Ken Goldwasser, Director, Learning Solutions
Seertech Solutions America, Springfield, VA

Overlook at Cloud Camp, a 1,500-sf meeting/event space. Cloud Camp, accommodating up to 60 guests, sits atop Cheyenne Mountain seven miles from the main resort. In addition to guest cabins, Cloud Camp offers activity options from hiking and mule rides to archery, crafts and yoga.

In June, Sea Island Company, which includes The Cloister and other Sea Island, Georgia, properties, announced that ownership would consolidate under the Anschutz family, previously one of four owners. What does that have to do with Colorado? That ownership pairs Sea Island with The Broadmoor, also owned by Anschutz. The newly formed Broadmoor-Sea Island Company will oversee the management and development of both of these independent and historic properties.

In late 2016, The Broadmoor opened The Estate House, a 12,000-sf historic mansion, which was designed in the 1920s and evokes visions of Gatsby-esque grand affairs and parties with its luxurious and opulent setting. The home has been entirely refreshed while maintaining the historic sophistication of the home's original woodwork, art and other period features.

This private retreat boasts a variety of spaces, customizable to fit the needs of any group. A grand parlor is equally suited to a cocktail reception of up to 120, private dinners for up to 60, or meetings. The dining room seats up to 16 and is serviced by The Broadmoor's culinary team. For a quiet escape, or breakout meeting, the library and third-floor reading rooms provide additional flex space, and an outdoor covered veranda overlooks two sprawling croquet lawns and manicured gardens, offering a natural extension to the inside areas.

In addition to the entertaining and meeting rooms, the property features five spacious and well-appointed bedrooms, each with a king or two queen beds and private baths. "We are thrilled to add this luxurious private venue as an extension of The Broadmoor's established meetings and events services," said Jack Damioli, president and CEO of The Broadmoor. "As we prepare to celebrate our centennial in 2018, it's exciting to see our legacy of offering guests a truly authentic, historic, luxury Western experience continue to grow."

A stay at The Estate House also affords access to the full range of the resort's amenities where guests can spend downtime at one of three championship golf courses, the Forbes Five Star spa and fitness center, a nationally recognized year-round tennis program, 26 retail boutiques and more than 20 restaurants, cafés and lounges, including Colorado's only



Credits: The Broadmoor



The Broadmoor's new 12,000-sf Estate House is a Gatsby-esque historic mansion. The grand parlor accommodates a cocktail reception for up to 120, dinners for up to 60, and the dining room seats up to 16.

School of Aspen opened downtown in March, offering classes, teambuilding, private events and more, and Rec Room, a lounge and glam nightclub, also debuted.

Summer and early fall is a particularly good time for groups to fly into Aspen now that American has added nonstop flights from Chicago and United has added them from San Francisco. In terms of lodging, the big news is that W Aspen and The Sky Residences at W Aspen are slated to open for the 2018 winter ski season. Located across from the base of Aspen Mountain, the design includes a 12,000-sf rooftop bar and pool.

The Grand Hyatt Denver and Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center had a combined \$10 million makeover to meeting spaces and ballrooms, with new designs providing more of a Colorado aesthetic and sense of place. Between the two hotels, planners have access to more than 113,200 sf of meeting and function space.

Boulder's renowned historic hotel, The Boulderado, is updating its annex guest rooms and event center, as well as the mezzanine and lobby in the main building. The work will be completed in two phases. The hotel has 160 guest rooms and 10,000 sf of meeting and event space.

Final Thoughts

The bottom line is that Colorado has enormous variety and depth, whether you're talking geography, aesthetic, budget and amenity requirements, cuisine or venues. And it's ready and willing to accommodate the needs of planners, businesses and their groups. **C&IT**

"The convenience of the hotel (The Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center) to the convention center is ideal as the weather in December in Colorado can be d'icey (pun intended)."

Jeff Wood, Vice President/General Manager
HP Workstation/Thin Client Global Business Unit
Fort Collins, CO

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Destination



The attendees of the Technology Exchange enjoyed dinner in the National WWII Museum's Freedom Pavilion and a performance by the Victory Belles.

Credits: Mark McDonald Photography

New Orleans

From One of America's Most Charming Cities to the No. 1 City for Food, the Big Easy Is a Planner's Dream Destination

By David Swanson

Among its many awards, *Travel + Leisure* named New Orleans "Number 1 City for Food in the U.S." in 2016 and one of "America's Most Charming Cities" in January 2017. Also, Fox Sports named New Orleans the "Number One Super Bowl Host City" in February 2017.

But it wasn't always that way.

In the last decade and a half, perhaps no other American city suffered as traumatic an injury as the one Hurricane Katrina inflicted on New Orleans. And by most accounts, probably no other city has had as dramatic a rebirth. That this cycle has transpired without sacrificing New Orleans' identity as a unique cultural cornerstone is almost a miracle.

"We were hanging on by a thread after Katrina," says Terry Epton CIS, CITE, DMCP, president of Hosts New Orleans, the global

chain of DMCs. "We had a lot to come back from, but whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Epton — a New Orleanian by birth — had a front-row seat for the city's comeback when he was sworn in as chairman of the board of the city's convention and visitors bureau a few months after Katrina. It was either the worst time to assume the leadership position, or the best — there was nowhere to go but up.

"What we had was a blank canvas to work with, to come back and figure out how we were going to reposition the brand," Epton added. "In some cases, it was an opportunity. There were the altruistic motivations of corporate America and the industry as a whole, and we were able to parlay some of that into making New Orleans a better convention destination."

The hard work has paid off. In 2004, the city welcomed 10.1 million visitors, while in 2006, the first full year after Katrina, visitor numbers dropped to 3.7 million. But by 2015, visitation had almost returned to pre-storm levels, with 9.8 million visitors coming to New Orleans.

Although New Orleans is celebrated for as Epton puts it — "food, booze and jazz" — the city continues to reveal new facets, many of which present fresh opportunities for the meetings industry. It's one reason Epton strongly recommends doing a site inspection to learn about the city firsthand, or discover its new angles. One riveting asset he says some planners mistakenly overlook is the National WWII Museum.

"People come here and do the swamp tour, a foodie tour, or the ghost and spirits tour, but they forget about the museum," Epton explains. "It's been a work in progress, expanding and expanding, but the National WWII Museum has been a big hit."

'Big Wow' Event

A meeting planner who didn't overlook the potential of the National WWII Museum was Janice McClain, CMP, principal of J.M. McClain & Associates LLC, in Harrisonville, Missouri, who planned a successful agricultural educational forum for the Technology Exchange in New Orleans in January 2017, which was attended by 500 farmers and chemical/fertilizer product retailers. McClain utilized the museum for their "big wow" event — an incentive day away from the meeting rooms.

McClain bought out the Creole Queen, an authentic paddlewheeler with the largest "indoor capacity" of any excursion vessel in New Orleans, ideal for events of up to 800 guests. For the morning sail on the Mississippi, a local terminal operations manager provided an overview of how agricultural products are transported by barge on the river, followed by a historical tour by the captain. After lunch on the boat, the group docked and went to the National WWII Museum.

The museum offers a surprisingly wide variety of event spaces designed to accommodate all-day meetings, theater-style presentations, luncheons, receptions and seated din-

ners. The state-of-the-art facility has a range of AV capabilities, along with in-house musical acts, ranging from a low-key trio to a swing orchestra and the Victory Belles, a vocal trio in 1940s USO attire.

"The museum is just extraordinary," McClain adds. As the official WWII museum, the collection of artifacts, interactive exhibits and the Tom Hanks-produced 4-D experience "Beyond All Boundaries," there is plenty to keep guests enthralled for hours. "We gave the attendees from 2 until 6 p.m. to tour the museum, then had a dinner in the Freedom Pavilion, an atrium featuring WWII aircraft such as a B-17 bomber suspended overhead, and featuring a performance by the Victory Belles. The museum staff was so accommodating, and the chef went way off the menu to create a truly remarkable buffet. It was the big highlight of the meeting."

But McClain was equally effusive about the host hotel for the Technology Exchange, The Roosevelt New Orleans, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel. "We wanted a warm weather destination, one that was easy to access, and the guys really wanted



Terry Epton, CIS, CITE, DMCP, President
Hosts New Orleans, New Orleans, LA

"People...do the swamp tour, a foodie tour...but they forget about the museum. It's been a work in progress, expanding and expanding, but the National WWII Museum has been a big hit."

to come to New Orleans," explains McClain. "But there aren't many places that are both a reasonable price and warm in late January. I knew this would be a more expensive hotel, but we've gotten it back in spades."

The Roosevelt is New Orleans' grand dame. Opened in 1893, the hotel is famous for the walnut-paneled Sazerac Bar, the Blue Room where Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey performed regularly, and how author Arthur Hailey checked in for two months and wrote the best-seller "Hotel." The 504-room Roosevelt closed due to flooding after Katrina, and then went through a \$170 million renovation that led to the hotel's reflagging as a Waldorf Astoria in 2009. The hotel has nearly 60,000 sf of meeting space, including three ballrooms. But would a lavish historical property be the right fit for McClain's group?

"These were farmers out of the heartland," says McClain, who worried that the upscale setting might be intimidating to people who don't travel often. "They're in jeans and plaid shirts, but they might be running a 20,000-acre farm. I believe the more information you share with both sides, the better the experience you are likely to have. If the hotel knows what to anticipate, then they can be better prepared."

And The Roosevelt was ready for McClain's group. "We put

this hotel staff through the ringer, and they responded so beautifully. There's a great amount of meeting space, without feeling like you're in a convention hotel. And the hotel gives you so much that you can't put a price tag on it. The staff is seasoned, welcoming and sincere."

One would-be challenge at the outset was a large check-out on the same day that McClain's group arrived.

"I fully expected our people to wait on their rooms for hours, and the front desk staff can make or break a meeting. They're the first and last contact with guests, and they don't get a lot of recognition. So I ordered 35 pizzas for the staff that day, to thank them in advance.

"We were greeted with a smile," McClain adds.

So Many Options

Marci Kleinsasser's search for a meeting destination for the annual conference of Handyman Connection, a collection of locally owned craftsman franchises, came with clear marching orders a year out.

"We choose a different city every year, and we were coming off Orlando — our East Coast destination last year," explains

"The ingredients and flavors all tell a rich story of our regions and history, and the diversity of the offerings really do help tell a story — the story of New Orleans."

Nicole Hutchison, CMP, Senior Sales Manager
Access Destination Services, New Orleans, LA



Kleinsasser, director of marketing for Handyman Connection, which is headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio. "We asked our franchisees to vote on the next conference site, and New Orleans was the top vote-getter."

Kleinsasser reviewed options around the country and came to New Orleans on a site visit hosted by the CVB to assess six potential properties. "The attendees have to be away from their business for three to five days to attend. And cost was definitely part of the factor" that led to choosing New Orleans for the January meeting. "We also felt like the city offered a good mix of cultural, social and business offerings.

"I chose The Westin New Orleans Canal Place for the great location in the heart of the French Quarter, the meeting space offered, the ability to offer our preferred dates and the best package overall. We also loved the fact that we would own all of the third-floor meeting space and contain our franchises and vendors to one main area. The breakout rooms weren't all over the property." Although Kleinsasser says her event didn't entail any unique requirements, "there are a few moving parts that all come together at different times. We hold a Vendor Showcase with 16 to 20 vendors, our general conference and

a preconference event. I suggest asking about the hotel's conference services department and their planning process in advance. Each hotel manages this process differently, so you want to understand it in advance."

For an offsite event, Kleinsasser says she was not lacking for choices. "Planners should know that New Orleans offers so many options in so many different areas around town. We used NOLA DMC, a locally owned destination management company, and did our social event at Pier 424 on Bourbon Street. They did a fantastic job — we were very pleased with the people, the food, and the location."

"Take advantage of the help and support of the CVB," Kleinsasser adds. "They are there for as much or as little as you need."

Top of the Food Chain

Following Katrina, a lot of New Orleans' rebuilding came about through large infusions of federal funds and support from relief agencies. But one of the ways the city got back on its feet and improved was entirely organic, as the dining scene not only rebounded quickly, but blossomed.

"New Orleans was always a foodie destination," explains Epton. "But what happened after Katrina was a proliferation of new chefs and restaurants." The New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau estimates that New Orleans had 800 restaurants in 2005, before the storm. Today the number of freestanding restaurants is more than 1,500.

"We're at the top of the food chain now," says Epton.

While these restaurants offer everything from gourmet repasts in elegant settings to the home-style cooking of Mother's Restaurant, for a high-profile, 70-person executive dinner held by *Automotive News* during the National Automobile Dealers Association Conference (NADA) in January, Nicole Hutchison needed a special venue.

"When planning a program in New Orleans, you have to keep in mind that food is one of the top things that your guests are looking forward to," explains Hutchison, CMP, and senior sales manager with the New Orleans branch of Access Destination Services. "New Orleans is bursting with culture, and our food is a huge part of that culture. The ingredients and flavors all tell a rich story of our regions and history, and the diversity of the offerings really do help tell a story — the story of New Orleans."

Hutchison turned to the team at Calcasieu to deliver. A private dining room headed by James Beard Award-winning chef Donald Link, Calcasieu offers a quartet of private dining rooms with a distinctly New Orleans warehouse feel, located just two blocks from the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. The rooms can accommodate groups ranging from 20 seated in the intimate Wine Room, to 150 seated, when the three main rooms are combined.

"The space has a clean and simple aesthetic, yet it still manages to incorporate an older, New Orleans vibe," says Hutchison. "The mixture of exposed brick and stark plain walls al-

lows for you to have simple décor, yet anything that you bring in would not clash and could work nicely in the space."

And for those who have dined at some of New Orleans' most celebrated venues previously — as many of the NADA executives probably have — Calcasieu offers something new, yet still refined. The food represents highlights from famed menus in the Link Restaurant Group, such as Cochon, Pêche and Herbsaint, all sourced from local farms and suppliers, with seasonal tasting menus and customized menus starting at \$85 per person for dinner.

"The customer service provided by their General Manager Brandy Trepagnier was absolutely wonderful," adds Hutchison. "She was very flexible with us and allowed us to custom create our final menu based on previous suggestions. She never told me 'no,' and she understood my need for quick responses."

Needless to say, the bar is set very high when it comes to food in New Orleans, and hotel dining has to live up to the city's reputation for exceptional meals. For Baton Rouge-based event planner Shannon K. Robertson, CAE, the Bourbon Orleans Hotel delivered the goods.

"Great food is a home run for any planner, and the Bourbon Orleans has the best," says Robertson, who used the hotel for a client's annual Kick Off Meeting and Masquerade Awards Gala, also in January. "The catering services were incredible. Every meal or break was executed perfectly and timely. The Masquerade Awards Gala menu selection we chose was the best banquet meal I've ever eaten in my 25-year planning career, and the attendees still talk about how great the food was."

The hotel's historic, 200-year-old Orleans Ballroom was the setting for the Kick Off meeting during the day; the ballroom was then transformed for the awards gala that evening. "We wanted to make sure that the layout of the room showcased a business meeting during the day and a black-tie event that evening. As the oldest and one of the most beautiful ball-



Janice McClain, CMP

J.M. McClain & Associates LLC, Harrisonville, MO

"There's a great amount of meeting space, without feeling like you're in a convention hotel. And the hotel (The Roosevelt) gives you so much that you can't put a price tag on it."

rooms in the city, it was the perfect venue to accommodate two distinct events in one day. The balcony that overlooks Orleans Street and the French Quarter was a great backdrop for beautiful photographs throughout the day and evening."

Robertson singled out a number of people at the Bourbon Orleans who helped ensure her event was a success. "From the initial site inspection and contract negotiations with Senior Sales Manager Deepa Woods to menu creation with Alyssa Sheehan, senior catering manager, every aspect of the planning was a priority for the staff team. Mark Becker, MPS, area director of sales, and Alyssa Sheehan, senior catering director were the most welcoming and engaging professionals I've had the pleasure to work with in many years."

"We also couldn't beat the value-added incentives they provided to my client," adds Robertson. "They even arranged for a private 'VIP Afterhours' in their lounge, the Bourbon O. It was a perfect conclusion to an amazing awards evening."

Beyond The Big Easy — Baton Rouge

Set on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, the Watermark Baton Rouge opened in October 2016, repurposing the iconic former Louisiana Trust & Savings Bank, famed for being the city's first skyscraper in 1927. Part of Marriott's Autograph Collection of individualized boutique hotels, the handsome hotel's art deco and Greek revival architectural elements have



Handyman Connection attendees get ready for their pre-Mardi Gras parade similar to the one pictured above.

"We asked our franchisees to vote on the next conference site, and New Orleans was the top vote-getter."



Marci Kleinsasser, CFE, Director of Marketing
Handyman Connection, Cincinnati, OH

been carefully preserved, including its marble staircase and plaster murals. The property features 2,300 sf of event space, ideal for intimate gatherings.

The year 2016 marked the second-best year on record for the recently renamed Raising Cane's River Center and Baton Rouge Performing Arts Theater. The facility added 87 new digital monitors and video walls around the complex and introduced two new food outlets. Also in the works: plans for the refurbishment of the Performing Arts Theater that will make the 40-year-old venue a new visual highlight for downtown. Discussions also are underway for the next phase of refurbishments that will focus on the arena and ballroom, which is the largest in Baton Rouge.

New and Noteworthy

Salamander Hotels & Resorts announced that the NOPSI Hotel will open this spring as the latest project to repurpose one of the CBD's historic buildings, invigorating the city's increasingly hip downtown lifestyle. The 217-room luxury hotel is named after the 90-year-old New Orleans Public Service Inc. building, a nine-story brick structure abandoned after Hurricane Katrina. The project's development team has worked closely with the State Historic Preservation Office to ensure that the architectural integrity of the building is retained. The hotel will have almost



Shannon K. Robertson says the Bourbon Orleans delivered "the best banquet meal I've ever eaten in my 25-year planning career."

14,000 sf of meeting space, including six breakout rooms and a 4,000-sf ballroom located in the adjacent Dryades Building. A 24-foot-high crane and track is being preserved as a unique architectural element and focal point for the ballroom.

In 2016 the Astor Crowne Plaza New Orleans completed a full-scale, \$13 million makeover. All 693 guest rooms were renovated, along with all of the hotel's meeting spaces. The hotel has three ballrooms ranging up to 8,300 sf, and two of the ballrooms have access to balconies. Including breakout rooms, the hotel offers 32,000 sf of meeting space.

The Aloft New Orleans Downtown will be the pilot property

launching RoomCast, a wireless personal network system that allows guests to stream content — safely and securely — from their smart devices directly to guest room televisions. Powered by Chromecast, the in-room network is equipped with a password, which guests use to access an app on their iOS or Android devices. At checkout, the personal area network password is reset for the next hotel guest, leaving no data behind.

New Orleans' most historic playhouse, the 95-year-old Le Petit Théâtre Du Vieux Carré, located just off Jackson Square, completed a multimillion-dollar renovation in 2013. The venue seats 320 and operates seasonally for the playhouse, but the theatre is also available for special events and stage performances. Conveniently, the facility is connected to Tableau, Dickie Brennan's newest restaurant, with a series of four restored private dining rooms upstairs that can be integrated for a special event. The dining rooms individually seat between 18 and 60 guests, and the entire restaurant can be rented for larger parties.

The 1,622-room Hilton New Orleans Riverside continued a multiphase, multiyear renovation with a facelift for the 24,000-sf Grand Salon Ballroom and the entire second floor meeting space. The renovations included updated carpet, lighting, technology and a complete redesign of the Churchill Ballroom that added airwalls, allowing the 20,000-sf room to divide into seven breakout rooms (compared to its previous three).

The Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans offers Impact Experiences, providing opportunities for guests to contribute to the local community. These include working with the 532-room hotel's culinary team to prepare meal donations to be served at St. Jude Community Center or organizing school supplies for the students at KIPP Central City Academy. Another option is working with Save Our Cemeteries, a uniquely New Orleanian non-profit designed to help restore the above-ground cemeteries, one more facet to the city's

lure and mystery. The Ritz-Carlton offers 35,000 sf of meeting and conference space.

In 2015 the W New Orleans located just opposite the Harrah's Casino was closed and, following a \$29 million renovation, was converted to Le Meridien New Orleans. The brand mingles European sensibilities with contemporary finish, and guests of Le Meridien gain free admission to some of the city's top art museums. The 410-room hotel has 20 meeting rooms covering more than 20,000 sf of meeting space — all, except for the Grand Ballroom, provide natural light. (The smaller W New Orleans — French Quarter remains in operation.) **C&IT**



On The Move



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Celebrity Cruises has added two new team members to their incentive and charter sales team. **Tom Dougher** was named manager, North America charter sales. He previously was director of charter sales for Norwegian Cruise Line. **Alexis Puma** was named international charter manager. She formerly served as manager, national accounts for Windstar Cruises.

Kathy Kolar was named director of sales and marketing at the Pittsburgh Marriott City Center. Her most recent responsibilities included the preopening marketing for the Hotel Indigo in Pittsburgh and implementing the sales

and marketing, revenue management and forecasting plans for the Hilton Garden Inn Pittsburgh University Place.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort has named **Aaron Weegar** as director of sales. He was most recently director of sales at The Diplomat Resort & Spa in Fort Lauderdale. **Nick Anderson** was promoted to director of group sales. He was associate director of sales.

The Omaha Marriott Downtown at the Capitol District, to open in summer 2017, has named **Megan Gilligan** as director of sales and marketing, and

Laurie Nielsen-Singer and **Kristy Phalen** as sales account executives. Gilligan was director of event sales at the La Vista Conference Center Complex in Omaha. Nielson-Singer previously held sales manager positions with the Lincoln Marriott Cornhusker Hotel and Hilton Omaha Hotel. Phalen was assistant general manager at the Sheraton Omaha.

Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa in Rancho Santa Fe, California, has named **Katie Rooney** regional group sales manager. She was senior national sales manager for the Inn at Rancho Santa Fe in San Diego. **C&IT**

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