

# Orlando



## Meeting & Incentive Planner Guide





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# No Better Time to Visit Orlando

For more than 30 years, Orlando's CVB has been widely hailed as one of America's best. Current President and CEO of Visit Orlando, George Aguel, has an unparalleled passion for the place.

"We certainly like being the No. 1 meeting destination in the country," Aguel says. "And, we did a lot of work in order to get to that position. One of the things that made us so successful is that we had the big benefit that all our community leaders — including elected officials and all the leaders of the tourism industry — came together in recognizing that tourism is the foundation of who we are. It's also the driver of our economy. So, it just made sense to take that foundation and use it to grow our meetings industry and get it to where it is today. The thing that has really driven that was always looking to the future and always having the right vision to get to where we wanted to be."

A key ingredient in Orlando's rise to the top of the meetings industry, Aguel says, is a powerful and widespread pride in the destination. "We also have some fantastic assets that support our effort, in terms of product and services. And, both of those are also constantly evolving and getting better."

Even more important, he says, is a simple philosophy that underlies the city's unyielding commitment to ongoing innovation.

"We accept that in order to remain at the front of the pack of major meetings destinations, we have to keep evolving and improving upon the experiences that groups can have here," he says. "Because we are the No. 1 family vacation destination in the world and the theme park capital of the world, we have a business model that by its nature must consistently invest in growth. We have to constantly add more things to do and update the things that we offer. The constant refreshment of that infrastructure has had a huge impact

By John Buchanan

on how the rest of the destination functions. And, that constant progress, in turn, breeds more interest from hotels, as well as dining, entertainment and shopping venues. All of those things constantly keep us moving forward."

## A Shared Vision

Yet another key factor in Orlando's extraordinary success has been its ability, under the leadership of Visit Orlando, to forge a clear vision for its evolution and to be able to have a wide variety of stakeholders to embrace and implement that vision.

"I firmly believe that one reason we have been able to do that is [because of] the board of directors of Visit Orlando, which is made up of top representatives of every category of our industry," Aguel says. "For example, we have the executive director of Orlando International Airport, the head of the convention center, the mayor of the city, the mayor of



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***"One of the things that made us so successful is that we had the big benefit that all our community leaders ... came together in recognizing that tourism is the foundation of who we are. So, it just made sense to take that foundation and use it to grow our meetings industry and get it to where it is today."***

**George Aguel, President and CEO, Visit Orlando**

the county and leaders from every segment of our tourism industry. We also have business leaders and community leaders on our board. The result of all that is we have constantly focused on an overall vision for the destination that is shared. And, the purpose of that vision is to keep us at the top of our game. Our focus is constantly on one thing, and that is to remain the country's premier tourism and meetings destination."

Another element of Orlando's dominance has been its use of innovative public-private partnerships to get a vast array of things done.

"Public-private partnerships have been the foundation of much of what we've done. They are really our secret to success," Aguel says. "For example, you see the results in the venues that have been created as a result of public-private partnerships. Those things include a world-class arena and performing arts center and our 'medical campus' infrastructure for pharmaceutical and medical meetings. Those partnerships have also been responsible for the expansion of our airport and convention center and all the many other things that have been done to make the city such an

attractive destination in terms of infrastructure. The term we use to characterize how all those things were planned and accomplished is 'a culture of collaboration.' What it means is that everyone is on the same page when it comes to a vision for the city."

Major meeting planners who oversee events across the U.S. and around the world agree that the precision of Orlando's plans for its development into a major meetings destination are at the root of much of its success.

"One of the things that really makes Orlando unique as a meetings destination is the infrastructure that has existed for a long time as a result of its stature as the world's top vacation destination," says Beth Witzak, a Longmont, Colorado-based global account executive at independent planning behemoth Conference Direct. "For example, if you need to bus tour attendees around from here to there, that capability has already been thought out in Orlando and is well-established. There's a system for pickups at each property and a great transportation system for moving people around. That capability, at least at the level that Orlando

***Continued on page 6***



# Orlando No.1 for Meetings

## The Rise to Top Status

There are three fundamental reasons why Orlando has risen from humble beginnings — as the home of family vacation-oriented, world-famous theme parks — to become the top meetings destination in the U.S.



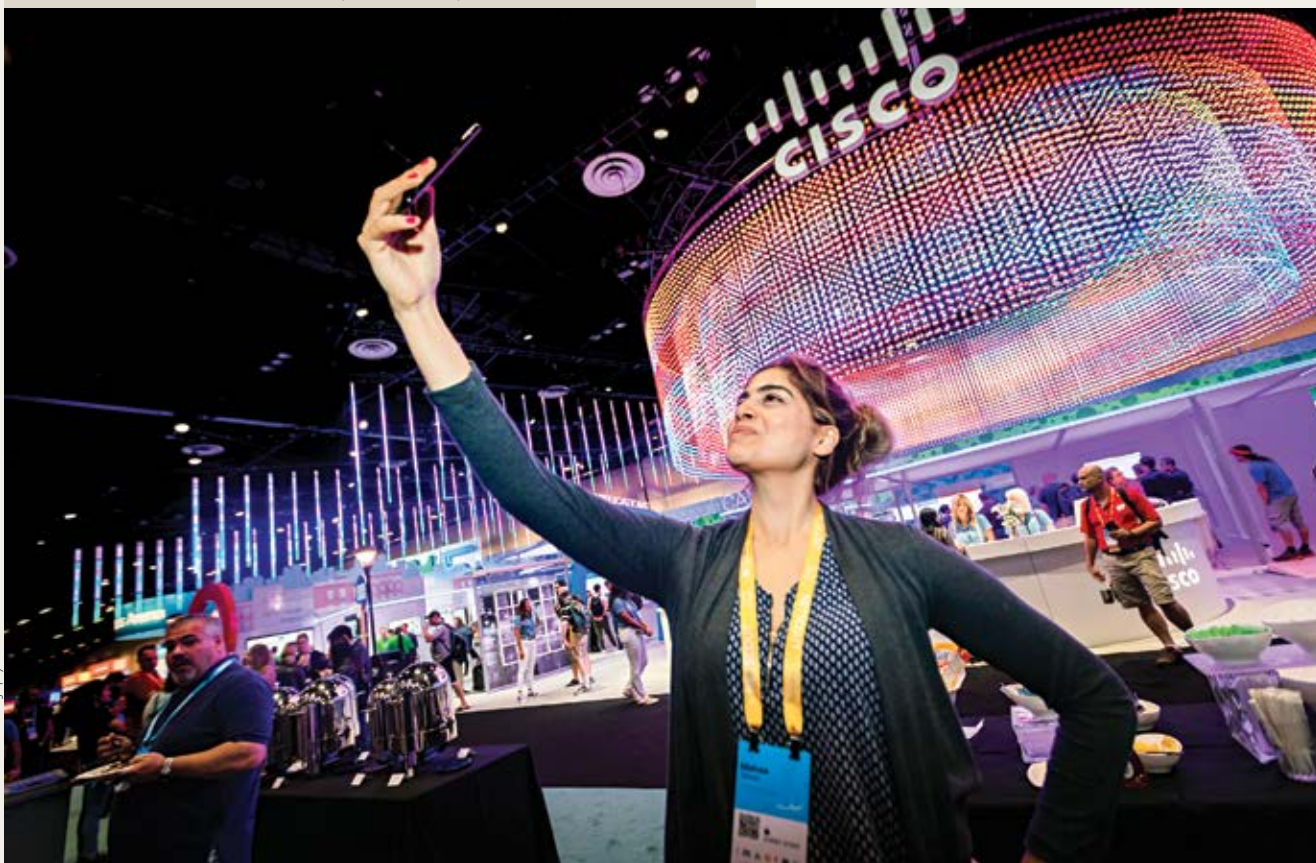
Due to attendee preference, Cisco brought its largest customer event and annual trade show, Cisco Live, back to Orlando in 2018.

One is its long-standing status as the No. 1 family vacation destination in the entire world, which has fostered a massive infrastructure that includes formidable airlift and an unmatched hotel inventory that features top-quality product at a wide range of price points.

The second is a decade-long commitment, from all of the city's major stakeholders, to transform a vacation mecca into a modern, diverse and sophisticated meetings and convention destination.

The third, and arguably most important, has been the extraordinary leadership of Visit Orlando, the city's CVB, in overseeing and inspiring the collective vision that has transformed Orlando into the winner of the destination sweepstakes.

**ORLANDO**



Credit: Sonia Savio Photography



# Visit Orlando



Credit: Rosen Hotels and Resorts

Above: Play a round of golf on Rosen Shingle Creek's magnificent greens. Right: The pool area is an exceptional spot for outdoor events.

## *Continued from page 4*

has it, does not exist in many destinations. That's because it has not been thought out as well as it has in Orlando. That is something that really sets the city apart as a meetings destination."

## **Hands-on Role**

Because Orlando's meetings industry is so vast — and always growing — Visit Orlando is viewed as the "official association" for the entire industry, Aguel says. "We represent everybody who has any interest in the industry. Those are our members. And, our goal is to represent those members to the world and to help them be more successful."

Visit Orlando aggressively markets the destination globally and on a grand scale, Aguel says.

"Very few destinations are marketed on the scale that



Orlando is. A major part of that marketing effort is on the meetings and convention side. In that way, we do not lag behind any other destination. We don't rest or rely on past accomplishments just because we now lead the pack. We



Credit: Topgolf

Topgolf Orlando is a sports entertainment pavilion that is fun for all skill levels.

at least one meeting, ranging in size from 150 to nearly 2,000 attendees, also gives Visit Orlando high marks.

"I always enjoy working with them," she says. "I prefer to work with CVBs because they are really the local experts on the destination. There is just no way that I could ever know as much about Orlando and

work constantly to educate meeting and convention planners about the destination and to motivate them to come here. We are never comfortable that we have gotten to where we want to be. We are never complacent about the success we've had."

The CVB's deep and abiding relationships with meeting planners are based on the fact that it "provides every conceivable type of support service that a meeting and convention planner could want," Aguel says. "We also coordinate among a very strong, broader infrastructure that includes a number of excellent destination management companies we work very closely with. We also work very closely with transportation companies, production companies and audio-visual companies. One of our strengths is how we help to manage our overall resources and coordinate that with meeting planners. We work to help marshal the entire resources of the destination on behalf of planners."

Dieter Burgoa, general manager of major destination management company PRA Orlando, gives Aguel and his team high marks for their stewardship.

"They do a tremendous job of assisting us and our clients," Burgoa says. "They also do a tremendous job of marketing the destination. The level of exposure they give us in the industry, all over the world, is incredible. And, we see the impact of the things they do. Visit Orlando is one of the biggest reasons why Orlando is so successful as a meetings destination. They are one of the reasons we continue to break records in terms of our meeting business. For us, as a DMC, they are very easy to work with, very professional."

Witzak, who for the last six years has chosen Orlando for

what to do there as Visit Orlando knows. They do a great job in helping planners make the best use of the destination, especially when it comes to knowing what's new."

Heather Henderson Thomas, senior manager, event experience and operations, Cisco Live, at San Jose, California-based technology giant Cisco, plans the company's massive annual customer conference, which draws 27,000 attendees from across the U.S. and around the world.

She and her event management company, George P. Johnson Experience Marketing, work closely with Visit Orlando when Cisco comes to town, most recently last June. Cisco Live was previously hosted in Orlando in 2008 and 2013. Henderson Thomas also offers praise of the support capabilities of Visit Orlando.

"I love working with them, not only from a business perspective, but also because they are wonderful people," she says. "What is most valuable about them, as the CVB, is that they take a special interest in what our event



Dieter Burgoa, General Manager, PRA Orlando

***"They also do a tremendous job of marketing the destination. The level of exposure they give us in the industry, all over the world, is incredible.... Visit Orlando is one of the biggest reasons why Orlando is so successful as a meeting destination."***

means, what our objectives are. They work to really understand our audience. They offer up ideas and solutions that are enormously helpful to me and my staff. I'm always amazed at the attention to detail that they bring to the table. They work seamlessly with George P. Johnson. They stay in touch with me even when we're not coming back right away in order to let me know what's going on and what's new."

**ORLANDO**



# Meeting Hotels & Resorts

## An Expanding Roster of Options

Orlando features a vast array of hotels from every major brand and spanning a range of price points.

For most corporate planners, perhaps the single most important factor in a decision to use Orlando as the destination for a meetings or incentive program is its formidable and diverse hotel inventory. The city now

boasts more than 450 hotels and almost 120,000 rooms. Represented among that inventory is every major hotel brand, from luxury properties to midmarket and more budget-conscious options.

"There's no doubt that a key factor in our growth as a destination over the last few years has been the



NBCUniversal

Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando Resort has 47,000 square feet of spectacular outdoor meeting space.





Credit: Universal Orlando Resort

Center: The Grand Caribbean Ballroom at the Loews Sapphire Falls Resort is 40,713 square feet and features 28-foot ceilings. The resort also provides spacious meeting rooms (top) and a complimentary water taxi around the “campus” (bottom).

development of so many world-class meeting and convention hotels,” Aguel says.

### Universal Orlando Resort

Among the city’s most appealing options for meetings and incentive programs is the ever-expanding “campus” at Universal Orlando Resort. The complex, which features 9,000 guest rooms and 295,000 square feet of meeting space, includes six individual properties — the Loews Royal Pacific Resort, Loews Sapphire Falls Resort, Loews Portofino Bay Hotel, Hard Rock Hotel and Universal’s Cabana Bay Beach Resort, as well as the new 600-room Universal’s Aventura Hotel, which opened in August.

The foundation of Universal’s state-of-the-art meeting facilities is its new Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando, which spans and connects the Loews Sapphire Falls Resort and Loews Royal Pacific Resort, each of which has 1,000 rooms. Together, the facility features 247,000 square feet of meeting space.

### Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort is one of the city’s most celebrated meeting hotels. With 2,270 guest rooms, the resort includes a Swan tower and a Dolphin tower. The complex features more than 331,000 square feet of meeting and event space, including 86 meeting rooms, two boardrooms and 110,500 square feet of divisible, contiguous convention-exhibit space. There are four ballrooms, including the 55,000-square-foot Hemispheres Ballroom. The Swan and Dolphin also offers 128,190 square feet of beautifully landscaped outdoor function space. The resort has 17 restaurants and lounges, including four signature fine-dining restaurants — Todd English’s BlueZoo, which specializes in seafood; Il Mulino New York Trattoria, which serves Italian fare; Kimonos, which serves sushi; and Shula’s Steak House. The Swan and Dolphin also boasts five swimming pools, a Balinese-inspired Mandara Spa, two health clubs and two regulation-size volleyball courts.

### Caribe Royale Orlando

Another of Orlando’s most highly regarded meeting properties is the 1,335-room, all-suite Caribe Royale Orlando. Accommodations include one-bedroom suites and two-bedroom villas. The hotel’s convention center



# Meeting Hotels & Resorts

includes the 40,000-square-foot Grand Sierra Ballroom, 26,000-square-foot Caribbean Ballroom, 29 breakout rooms, two executive boardrooms and a business center serviced by a UPS Store. The Main Reception Building features a 6,400-square-foot Martinique Ballroom, four smaller breakout rooms and an executive boardroom. The AAA Four Diamond Venetian Chop House, Caribe Royale's signature restaurant, serves contemporary cuisine, including critically acclaimed steaks and seafood.

## Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

The 862-room Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate is yet another top hotel option. The AAA Four Diamond resort features 248,111 square feet of meeting space, including 73 meeting rooms. The largest measures 28,800 square feet. The resort's No. 1 amenity for many meeting groups is its unparalleled golf facilities. It features 36 holes of championship golf, as well as the David Leadbetter Golf Academy world headquarters and Champions 9, a lighted nine-hole, par 3 pitch-and-putt course. Other amenities include a 10,000-square-foot

Mokara Spa, a full-service fitness center, a basketball court, billiards tables in the David's Club bar-lounge and jogging, hiking and bicycle paths. The property's signature restaurants are Zen, a stylish and sophisticated Chinese eatery that also features one of the city's best sushi bars, and Trevi's, which serves fine Italian food.

## The Villas of Grand Cypress

Cheryl Benjamin, travel services manager at Dart Container in Mason, Michigan, has chosen another of Orlando's premier meeting hotels, the Villas of Grand Cypress, for two of her most important meetings each year since 2012. Last year, she hosted three at the resort. The company held its two most recent meetings there last November: a five-day meeting for 100 attendees and a three-day event for 80 attendees.

The AAA Four Diamond Villas of Grand Cypress, which is also on *U.S. News & World Report's* prestigious "Best Hotels" list, features a stand-alone 10,500-square-foot Executive Meeting Center, which offers four meeting rooms divisible up to eight. The facility can accommodate groups up to 240. The top meeting amenities at the hotel include 45 holes of Jack Nicklaus-designed golf and the Grand Cypress Academy of Golf. The hotel's signature restaurant is The Clubhouse, which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"The reason we ever picked Orlando for a meeting in the first place, back in 2012, was the Villas of Grand Cypress," Benjamin says. She discovered the property on a site visit.

"The first thing that sold me on the property was its location," she says. "There are just any number of things that people can get out and do after hours on their free time if they're staying there. It's convenient to everything, including Restaurant Row on Sand Lake Road, which is very important. The second factor, however, was that even though you're right in the middle of everything, you don't feel like you're in the middle of everything. You feel like you're at a quiet, private resort, which you are. You really have



Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort features more than 331,000 square feet of meeting and event space.

Credit: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort



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# Meeting Hotels & Resorts

to do a site visit to understand how quiet and peaceful it is, what an incredible retreat it is."

The other attribute that immediately attracted her attention on her visit was the quality of the food and beverage. That's a critical consideration for Dart Container, since all group meals are done at the hotel, buffet-style.

"During that first meeting back in 2012, and for all of our meetings since, the food and beverage has been absolutely wonderful," Benjamin says. "They do a spectacular job with banquet menus. The food has just been amazing. My attendees have never once



*Cheryl Benjamin, Travel Services Manager, Dart Container*

***"There are just any number of things that people can get out and do after hours on their free time if they're staying there [Villas of Grand Cypress]. It's convenient to everything, including Restaurant Row on Sand Lake Road."***

been disappointed. In fact, they accuse me of trying to fatten them up."

The third factor that has won Benjamin's long-term loyalty has been the quality of the service she and her attendees get. "The level of service at Villas of Grand Cypress is just off the charts," she says. "I've said for years now that if I could take their staff and move them



Credit: Caribe Royale

The all-suite Caribe Royale Orlando offers three huge ballrooms, 33 breakout rooms and three executive boardrooms in total.





Many meeting groups enjoy a round of golf at Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate's 36-hole course (top) and sitting by the firepit on a beautiful night outside (below).



Credit: Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

around to the other places I do meetings, I'd have better meetings everywhere I go. The service is just incredible. They always anticipate my needs. I don't need to ask for things to be done. They're so good and so attentive that they know, without me having to say anything, what I need. That's because they make that kind of service a priority."

### **Wyndham Grand Resort Orlando at Bonnet Creek**

For her most recent meeting in Orlando, a five-day,

four-night event for 2,000 attendees, Witzak chose the Wyndham Grand Resort Orlando Bonnet Creek, along with the larger Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek, located across the street. It was the third time she had chosen the Wyndham property. The 500-acre complex, which includes timeshare units and is situated around a 10-acre lake, is anchored by the 400-room hotel. The property features 32,000 square feet of meeting space, including 6,000 square feet of new space added in 2016, featuring the 3,500-square-foot Bonnet Creek Ballroom and the 2,115-square-foot Expedition Room.

The Wyndham Grand's signature restaurant is the AAA Four Diamond Deep Blu Seafood Grille, which serves fresh seafood and steaks, as well as sushi. It is regularly named by local and national food critics as one of Orlando's best restaurants. Last May, it was cited by *Orlando Magazine* for having the best service of any local restaurant. The hotel also features a state-of-the-art, 5,700-square-foot Blue Harmony Spa.

Witzak finds the Wyndham Grand to be ideal for small to medium-sized groups. "I have personally been onsite at that property a total of five times, including site visits, and it is always a positive experience," she says. "My clients always enjoy it, as well, and want to go back.

"It's a hidden gem in a great location. The setting is really great. For example, it overlooks a beautiful lake. The food and beverage is amazing. And, the service is top-notch."

One amenity she likes in particular is the hotel's stylish "executive lounge." It can be rented for small VIP-type events for up to 75 attendees, Witzak says.



# Meeting Hotels & Resorts



Credit: Villas of Grand Cypress

Planners say one of the best things about the Villas of Grand Cypress is that it feels secluded even though it's in the center of all the fun.



"What I like about it so much is that as a venue, you're experiencing something unique that you won't find in every hotel," she says. "It's totally private and sophisticated. The F&B they do for it is just fantastic. It all adds

up to just sort of being an exclusive experience that people remember. It's something special, something more upscale than the typical hotel meeting venue."

Witzak also gives high marks to the Wyndham Grand's meeting space. "What I like most is that it's upscale and modern, but it has a real 'boutique' feel about it," she says. "The infrastructure, including the lighting options and supporting technology, are excellent. I also like the layout of it because most of the space is on one floor, and it's easy to navigate."

Like most planners, she also cites convention services as the single most important attribute of any hotel. "The Wyndham Grand's convention services department is fantastic," Witzak says. "They are very creative. They give you good ideas about the types of things you can do onsite, including things you can do in terms of F&B. The staff is also really friendly, and they genuinely want to do everything they can to make your meeting successful. That level of service extends to the front desk and the housekeeping staff."



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ORLANDO



# Meeting Hotels & Resorts

## Cisco's Citywide Room Block

When Cisco returned to Orlando for its third citywide Cisco Live event in 2018, one of the main reasons was because the destination is so popular among the network engineers, company executives and others who attend the five-day, four-night meeting.

"The No. 1 reason why we've used Orlando three times now is because for Cisco Live, our largest customer event and annual trade show, attendee preference is a major consideration," Henderson Thomas says. "We ask our attendees where they'd like to go, and they tell us. Orlando consistently comes up in those surveys as one of the top destinations in the country, in terms of attendee preference."

One of the reasons: "They like the fact that there are so many excellent hotels at a range of price points," Henderson Thomas says.

For the 2018 meeting, Cisco's official room block included 15,000 rooms in 34 hotels.

The company designated four headquarters hotels, including the Hyatt Regency Orlando, located directly across the street from the Orange County Convention Center and connected by a pair of skybridges.

"We used the Hyatt Regency not only as a headquarters hotel, but we also used all of their meeting space in order to be able to extend our programming from the convention center to the hotel," Henderson Thomas says. "The other headquarters hotels were the Hilton Orlando, located just up the street on International Drive and also connected to the convention center, as well as the Rosen Center and Rosen Plaza, also located near the convention center and also both connected by skyways. Those four hotels, all located adjacent to the convention center and connected by skyways, are a good example of the meeting infrastructure in Orlando."



Credit: Universal Orlando Resort

One of Universal Orlando's newest hotels, Loews Sapphire Falls Resort offers 1,000 guest rooms and 115,000 square feet of meeting space.





The stunning Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek overlooks a beautiful lake and offers top-notch service.

The AAA Four Diamond, 1,641-room Hyatt Regency Orlando, which in its former incarnation was the legendary Peabody Orlando, features 315,000 square feet of meeting and event space, which includes five ballrooms, 105 breakout rooms, a 56,000-square-foot rotunda with 53-foot-tall floor-to-ceiling windows and 52,000 square feet of outdoor function space.

"The room product and meeting space at the Hyatt Regency are quite lovely," Henderson Thomas says.

"The expansion of the meeting space they have done is beautiful. For example, I love the natural light. That makes a big difference in the feel of the meeting. You're no longer just enclosed in a banquet room. To have such huge floor-to-ceiling windows is beneficial for any event."

She is also fond of the Hilton Orlando up the street. "It's a great hotel product to have there on International Drive by the convention center," she says. "It's also a great hotel for both business meetings and for the families of attendees when they come in. The room product is very nice and spacious, and the hotel has plenty of amenities."

She also praises the trio of independently owned and operated Rosen hotels, including the Rosen Center and Rosen Plaza next to the convention center.

"We put a lot of our staff, speakers and exhibitors in the Rosen hotels. A lot of our attendees chose to stay there because they don't have to take a bus to get to and from the convention center," she says. "We also hosted a couple of events at the Rosen properties, and they are a great representation of the destination. Then there is Rosen Shingle Creek, which is another fantastic property, even though it's not in the convention district. It's a very different experience than the two downtown properties. It's more of a resort, with great amenities like its golf course."

The Shingle Creek Golf Club, with a championship course updated by the late Arnold Palmer before his death, is adjacent to the hotel.

Among its amenities is the Brad Brewer Golf Academy. Rosen Shingle Creek holds a AAA Four Diamond Award.

**ORLANDO**



# New & Renovated

## Getting Bigger and Better

Over the next two years, Orlando will add more than 10,000 new hotel rooms, as its existing hotels undergo constant renovations, expansions and improvements.

Between now and the end of 2020, Orlando will experience the greatest increase in new hotel room inventory it has seen in 20 years, Aguel says.

"In 2019 alone, we're adding more than 5,000 rooms. And, we'll add about that same number of rooms in 2020. So, by the time everything is open, we will have gotten to a total hotel room inventory of almost 139,000," he says.

The big news at the moment, Aguel adds, is that Universal will be opening a pair of hotels under the new brand, Universal's Endless Summer Resorts. The key to the brand is affordability, Universal says on its website. The new 750-room Endless Summer Surfside Inn & Suites, opening this summer, "has the lowest rates of any Universal hotel," the website says.

A sister hotel, the 2,050-room Dockside Inn and Suites, will open in 2020.

"We also have a second JW Marriott property coming



JW Marriott Bonnet Creek will offer upscale lodging when it opens in 2020.

into the luxury market," Aguel says. "It will be part of the Bonnet Creek complex that includes the Waldorf-Astoria Orlando, the Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek and the Wyndham Grand Resort Bonnet Creek. The new JW Marriott Bonnet Creek, opening in 2020, will include 516 guest rooms and 50,000 square feet of meeting space."

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin will also add a third building, which will house 350 guest rooms, in 2020.

And, perhaps most exciting of all, a new 184-room Margaritaville Resort Orlando, with 40,000 square feet



Affordability is key to the 750-room Universal Endless Summer Surfside Inn & Suites, set to open later this year.



# AN **ALL-NEW** PERSPECTIVE ON MEETINGS AND EVENTS



All-New Walt Disney World Dolphin Lobby

The Walt Disney World Dolphin lobby has undergone a \$12 million re-design, the final stage of a \$150 million renovation project, the largest makeover in the resort's history. It has completely transformed into a sleek, contemporary space featuring new food and beverage options and offer an inviting area for guests to relax or network. A recipient of the prestigious Meetings & Conventions Hall of Fame Award, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is a nationally respected and recognized leader in the convention resort arena. The resort offers more than 331,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, 86 meeting rooms, and 2,270 guest rooms and suites which feature the Westin Heavenly® Bed. Attendees can also relax in the luxurious Mandara Spa, indulge in one of our 17 world-class restaurants and lounges or enjoy our unique Disney Differences.



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# New & Renovated



The new Margaritaville Resort Orlando will have more than 40,000 square feet of tropical-inspired indoor/outdoor spaces.

of meeting space, will open early this year, bringing to town Jimmy Buffett's unique vision of what's being called "an island state of mind."

"Margaritaville will be more than just a hotel," Aguel says. "It will be a mixed-use complex that includes dining, entertainment and shopping."

Located in the convention center district is the 653-room Avanti Palms Resort and Conference Center, which opened last May and features 20,000 square feet of meeting and function space.

A trio of Orlando hotels are currently expanding their meetings spaces. The 815-room Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress

is adding a new 25,000-square-foot ballroom that will bring its total meeting and function space to 102,000 square feet.

The 781-room Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld, located in the convention district, is adding a new 16,500-square-foot ballroom and six new breakout rooms, bringing its total meeting space to 215,000 square feet. It will be completed in March.

The 1,020-room DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld recently added a new 20,000-square-foot ballroom, bringing its total indoor/outdoor meeting and event space to 100,000 square feet.

**ORLANDO**



Outdoor events at the DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld are surrounded by lush tropical landscaping.



# Meeting & Convention Facility

## Everything Under One Roof

Orlando's convention center, the second largest in the U.S., is about to undergo a \$605 million expansion and renovation that will make it the most modern and multifunctional in the country.

The 7 million-square-foot Orange County Convention Center, originally opened in 1983 and since renovated and expanded multiple times, includes the 4 million-square-foot West Building and the 3 million-square-foot North-South Building.

### Future Plans

The West Building houses 1,103,538 square feet of exhibition space; 313,140 square feet of meeting space, including 49 individual meeting rooms and 138 breakout rooms. It also features the 62,182-square-foot Valencia Ballroom, 2,643-seat Linda W. Chapin Theater and a 160-seat lecture hall.

The North-South Building includes 950,282 square

feet of exhibition space; 166,050 square feet of meeting space, including 25 individual meeting rooms and 94 breakout rooms.

"Our convention center now has more than 2 million square feet of total exhibit space," Aguel says. "It's a venue that we, as a destination, have put a lot of investment in. We're now moving forward with the rest of what has been a major expansion that has already enlarged and updated the facility."

Plans call for the new project to take place in the North-South Building. "We're also creating a new, very modern concourse between the North-South Building and the West Building. We're adding an 80,000-square-foot ballroom and new meeting rooms, as well as a 200,000-square-foot, all-purpose venue," Aguel says. "In other words, it will provide planners with a new and exciting kind of flexibility in terms of how the convention center can be used. It's also pillar-free and has a combination of retractable floor



An aerial view from the North-South Building shows the downtown skyline and ICON Orlando in the background.



# Meeting & Convention Facility



Credit: Orange County Convention Center

The West Building houses a ballroom, theater and lecture hall.

seating, so it can be used as exhibit space or for general sessions or as a concert or entertainment venue that can accommodate 18,000 to 20,000 people."

The goal, he says, is to break ground this year and complete the expansion in three to four years.

## Aesthetically Pleasing

For her 2018 Cisco Live event, Henderson Thomas used the entire convention center complex.

"From a business perspective," she says, "it offers, under one roof, an ample amount of space for such a major and growing event. So, from a show management perspective, it's easy to do the meeting there. The thing that particularly works well for us is that the majority of our event can take place under one roof. But because our meeting is growing so fast, we did have to spread out a little bit into the Hyatt Regency this year."

In terms of aesthetics, Henderson Thomas also gives high praise to the convention center.

"I like the physical facility a lot," she says. "For example, the atriums are big and bold and beautiful. They're also very nicely light-filled. When you're stuck in a facility all day, it's nice to be able to see outside and see some sunshine and blue sky occasionally."

Another element she particularly likes is the facility's extraordinary amount of contiguous space.

"It stretches all the way from Hall A to the Tangerine Ballroom," she says. "And there are very few walls in that stretch." The Tangerine Ballroom is a 48,600-square-foot space, previously known as West Hall F, that has been transformed into a stunningly modern multipurpose meeting room.



Credit: Orange County Convention Center

The Tangerine Ballroom is a 48,600-square-foot multipurpose meeting space.

"The configuration gives you a lot of flexibility in being able to use all of that space," Henderson Thomas says. "It allows you to create a lot of different kinds of experiences, all at the same time. And, we used all of it. For example, we used the atriums and foyers to create specific kinds of experiences that were perfectly suited to the individual spaces. It's nice to have that kind of flexibility away from the floor because it means that no matter where you are in the convention center, or where you're headed, there's always something going on. You never feel like you're walking through an empty corridor."

Henderson Thomas also praises the quality of the food and beverage at the convention center.

"I absolutely love the chefs there. We launched something completely new and different this year by making the culinary team at the convention center part of our planning team," she says.

"We wanted to break out of the traditional mold of lunch buffets and box lunches. So, we designed, in partnership with the culinary team, a whole grab-and-go food program. It was like having food trucks in a kiosk-type environment, where attendees could just walk up to a station that had something like greens and grains, where they could get a salad. Then, they could go to another kiosk a couple of stations over and pick up something completely different. Later, they could go to a sandwich station.

"We worked hard to reinvent our F&B experience this year. And, it worked beautifully. We got rave reviews from our attendees. A huge part of that success was because we worked so closely with the culinary team."

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## Visit the Main Attractions

With its world-famous huge theme parks, Orlando offers a stunning range of options, all of which feature Hollywood-quality production capabilities.

Although some meeting planners choose to ignore them, Orlando's theme parks are a major element in the appeal of the destination for meeting groups, Aguel notes.

"And, like the rest of the destination, they are always being expanded and improved upon. Particular venues, like The Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal, are incredibly popular with meeting attendees," he says.

### Universal

Universal's world-class hotels and meetings facilities are complemented by a trio of theme parks — Universal Studios Florida, Universal's Islands of Adventure and Universal's Volcano Bay — in addition to Universal CityWalk, which offers a long list of dining, entertainment and shopping options.

For meeting groups, the single biggest benefit of the theme parks is the Hollywood-quality production

capabilities they possess. Virtually anything that can be imagined can be created and staged, Aguel says.

And, such sophisticated world-class services are a turn-key operation, so meeting planners never have to worry about the execution of their vision.

For her Cicso Live event last summer, Henderson Thomas did a buyout of the Universal Studios theme park.



Street parties are extremely popular with attendees looking to enjoy the ambience of Universal's theme parks.







Universal Studios has streets lined with great shops and restaurants.

"We did a night that attendees are still talking about," she says. "It featured all of the attractions and a load of food and beverage, as well as five different musical acts that were staged throughout the venue. We used the Hard Rock Live stage and also built a stage in another location. Our attendees got to enjoy the Islands of Adventure theme park, as well as Universal Studios. And, everybody raved about the venues.

"Universal handled all of the food and beverage by having all of its food outlets open, which meant people had



Heather Henderson Thomas, Senior Manager, Event Experience and Operations, Cisco Live

*"We did a night that attendees are still talking about. It featured all of the attractions and a load of food and beverage.... Our attendees got to enjoy the Islands of Adventure theme park, as well as Universal Studios."*

a lot of food options. We also opened a F&B distribution kiosk outside the park."

Henderson Thomas, as the planner of a major citywide meeting, offers high praise for Universal's capabilities.



Groups can buyout Universal Studios for a private event and have access to the many outlets the theme park offers.



# Theme Parks

"They did a spectacular job. I just cannot say enough about our partnership with Universal. We've used them before, but 2018 was the first time that we took over all of Universal Studios. They are experts at what they do. They have the capability to handle an event like ours, with 25,000 attendees. It was just an amazing experience," she says.



*"One of the things that makes Orlando unique as a meetings destination is the infrastructure that has existed for a long time as a result of its stature as the world's top vacation destination."*

Beth Witzak, Global Account Executive, Conference Direct

## SeaWorld

For groups, SeaWorld offers a Private Elite VIP tour, which provides attendees with front-of-the-line access to rides, reserved seating at shows and the opportunity to feed dolphins, sea lions and sting rays.

Among the most popular individual attractions for meeting groups are SeaWorld's Antarctica exhibit, which features penguins, Shark Encounter and Mako, the tallest, fastest roller coaster in Orlando.

**ORLANDO**



SeaWorld's Antarctica exhibit featuring penguins is among the most popular attractions for meeting groups.

Credit: SeaWorld Orlando





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# Dining & Entertainment



Rocco's Tacos has a private room for special events.

## Enjoy the Local Scene

To complement its sensational hotel product and meetings and convention facilities, Orlando boasts ever-evolving and always-improving dining and entertainment options.

Yet another important factor in Orlando's rise to its lofty current status as a meetings destination has been the steady evolution of its dining scene over the last five years from chain restaurants popular with budget-conscious families to the fine-dining establishments demanded by meeting planners and attendees.

"The local dining scene has become much more sophisticated over the decade since we went to Orlando the first time," Henderson Thomas says. "Now you have such a wide variety of options. And, they range from more casual restaurants to fine-dining restaurants that cater to the most sophisticated palettes. And again, a big advan-

group dinner at Villas of Grand Cypress, attendees are on their own for three evenings. "Our attendees tend to go to Restaurant Row because it has absolutely everything and anything you could want to satisfy any taste," she says.

Restaurant Row is located along a one-mile stretch of Sand Lake Road, about 15 minutes from the convention center.

Among the relatively new Restaurant Row eateries that Burgoa favors for PRA clients is Slate, a classic modern American restaurant offering wood-grilled cuisine and an open-air dining area.

"It's a higher-end restaurant that is more suited to VIP dining," Burgoa says. "It serves classic American fare, including great wood-fired pizza."

Also on PRA's "go-to" list are Eddie V's Prime Seafood and Christini's Ristorante Italiano.

"We use those two restaurants often," Burgoa says, "but they have relatively small capacities of up to about 150 or 200 people."

Two other restaurants PRA favors, both of which are located in the ICON Orlando 360 complex on International Drive near the convention center, are Uncle Julio's, which serves upscale Mexican food, and Tapa Toro, which offers a creative take on tapas.

"Tapa Toro also serves paella as a house specialty," Burgoa says. "And, you can watch it being made. That means it's as much about the experience as it is the food. It's a very unique restaurant."

On the short-list of Restaurant Row establishments that Valentine favors are Christini's and Chatham's Place.

"Chatham's is basically American cuisine, but it has a bit of Italian influence, and it's a white-glove dining experience," she says. "It has an open kitchen, so you can see the chefs preparing the food. The food is also consistently excellent, which is important, especially for groups. And, you can buy it out for groups up to 100."

Another restaurant Valentine adores is Rocco's Tacos. "It sounds like a casual spot, but it actually has beautiful private space and exceptional Mexican food," she says. "It's really high-end, sophisticated Mexican food and very popular. And, the décor is just beautiful. It sits on a lake, so it also has a beautiful view. It offers both indoor and outdoor dining, which is nice, and the food is absolutely fabulous."



With delicious food and great ambience, Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar is an ideal venue to host an event.

tage for attendees is that you have options across multiple price points."

Hope Valentine, president and partner at CSI DMC Destination & Event Management, one of Orlando's premier DMCs, notes that many of the local restaurants she considers among the city's "hottest" for 2019 are located in either the city's Restaurant Row district or in the newer convention corridor along International Drive.

The quality of the local dining scene is important to Benjamin when she plans meetings — except for one





Mango's Tropical Cafe, featuring Latin-themed cuisine and live entertainment, guarantees a fun night out for attendees.



Taverna Opa is a popular Greek restaurant in the entertainment complex Pointe Orlando.

Rocco's Tacos is available for a buyout, for groups up to 450. "They also have a private room that can be split into two spaces for smaller groups," Valentine says.

***"I had a group of 3,000, and we did a buyout of the entire complex [The Pointe] and had a fabulous evening because there is a restaurant for every possible taste under one roof, and also a number of entertainment options."***

*Hope Valentine, President and Partner, CSI DMC Destination & Event Management*

Other restaurants Valentine recommends include Charley's Steak House, located on International Drive, and MoonFish and Big Fin Seafood Kitchen.

Among Orlando's most popular restaurants for meeting groups is the wildly popular Mango's Tropical Cafe, the Orlando outpost of the infamous South Beach Miami venue. Mango's features Latin-themed cuisine and a spectacular stage show reminiscent of the golden age of Carmen Miranda.

"We use Mango's quite a bit," Valentine says. "It is an absolutely beautiful venue. We do something there at least once a month. One reason for that is the Latin-themed live entertainment is so great. It's just a big, awesome, professionally choreographed stage show. People love it."

Given its almost unparalleled meeting infrastructure, including its top-notch dining scenes, Henderson Thomas

recommends that her peers who have never considered Orlando give it a look, based on her experience.

"Orlando offers a product that can meet the needs and objectives of a meeting of any size and scope, from a smaller, more intimate meeting to one as major as Cisco Live," she says. "The fact that it's a top tourist destination will also be appealing to your attendees because there's so much for them to do in their free time. And, you get all of that at reasonable prices. Those are just some of the things that are



so positive when you're talking about Orlando. It's just a great destination."

## Offsite Venues

Orlando also features a long list of spectacular off-site venues.

Valentine regularly uses Pointe Orlando, located just down International Drive from the convention center. The facility, which features a wide array of dining and entertainment options, is home to some of the city's most popular restaurants, including B.B. King's Blues Club, Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar, Maggiano's Little Italy, Greek food emporium Taverna Opa, The Oceanaire Seafood Room and a Capital Grille steak house. The Pointe also includes a Fat Fish Blue & Improv Comedy Club.

"The great thing about The Pointe," Valentine says, "in addition to all of its fantastic dining and entertainment options, is that it's so centrally located. I've used a number of the individual venues, like B.B. King's, for functions of various sizes. I also had a group of 3,000, and we did a buyout of the entire complex and had a fabulous evening because there is a restaurant for every possible taste under one roof, and also a number of entertainment options."

Valentine also favors the Hard Rock Live "black box" venue, located adjacent to the Hard Rock Cafe in Universal's vast CityWalk dining and entertainment complex.

"We use Hard Rock Live quite a bit," Valentine says. "The great thing about Hard Rock Live is that it's located on Universal's CityWalk, so there are lots of things to do on your own after your private event. You can spend the rest of the evening there and find something to do that you'll like. The other good thing about Hard Rock Live is that it's basically



Hard Rock Live in Universal's CityWalk is a "black box" theater, so it can be transformed into whatever is needed.



# Dining & Entertainment

a 'black box' theater, so you can transform it into whatever you want it to be. But it's also a gorgeous venue with great technology, including the sound system. And, Hard Rock Cafe next door caters the food and beverage." The entire Hard Rock complex is available for buyouts.

Valentine also cites the CityWalk complex as a truly world-class offsite venue. "You can do a buyout and a spectacular evening there for major groups," she says. "There is something for everybody, so everybody will love it."

CityWalk's many casual and fun dining options include: Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. Restaurant & Market, Fusion Bistro Sushi & Sake Bar, VIVO Italian Kitchen, Red Oven Pizza Bakery, Antojito's Authentic Mexican Food and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville.

Another sensational offsite venue is the Kennedy Space Center, located about 45 minutes away by bus near Cocoa Beach. It is a monument to the U.S. space program and its awe-inspiring exhibits include the Saturn 5 rocket that carried men to the moon.

"Although a lot of meeting planners are not aware it's there until we bring it up, Kennedy Space Center is one of the most popular offsite venues for groups," Burgoa says. "Once planners learn about it, they get very excited because it's something that you can only find in the Orlando market." Kennedy Space Center is also popular with many of Valentine's DMC clients. "It's just a home run every time for groups," she says. "It's a totally unique venue that is fascinating. It's really spectacular as a VIP-type event for smaller



Drive Shack Orlando boasts 90 climate-controlled bays that feature state-of-the-art golf and gaming technology, lounge seating and dining.



Topgolf Orlando is a sports entertainment pavilion that is fun for all skill levels.

groups because you can do things like a luncheon that features an astronaut as your speaker."

Because Orlando is such a paradise for golfers — its roster of world-class golf courses is second to none — the city has debuted a pair of innovative golf-related venues that are ideal for meetings, Aguel says. "One is Topgolf, which is a 55,000-square-foot pavilion that has more than 100 climate-controlled hitting bays."

The facility also features a Toptracer shot tracker, a full-service restaurant and bar, private meeting rooms and event spaces and a rooftop terrace with a fire pit.

The other is Drive Shack, which opened last April and accommodates groups from 10 to 1,000 attendees. It is a golf-related entertainment venue that features the latest technology, including interactive range games and virtual courses that allow participants to tee off around the world. The facility is designed to help golfers of all ages and skill levels improve their game in a fun environment. The 60,000-square-foot, three-story complex features 90 climate-controlled hitting bays with lounge seating; restaurant and bar that features craft beers, wines and cocktails; live entertainment and a classic arcade game center. The Drive Shack Academy offers fun clinics and one-on-one instruction.

"Drive Shack is an excellent venue that is very challenging for people who love golf," Aguel says. "It really tests your skills. And, both Top Golf and Drive Shack are ideal for teambuilding."

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**Tracy T**

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After talking R&D all day, it's time for a little R&R. So nice to be outside, we almost feel bad for everyone back home. 🍹 🍹 #BestMeetingEver  
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Locations, top: Universal CityWalk™; bottom left: Private event at Discovery Cove®; bottom right: Mango's Tropical Café Orlando.

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