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## CRUISE MEETINGS ON THE RISE

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FRESH  
VENUES

THE ART OF  
NEGOTIATION

MOUNTAIN  
MEETINGS

CREATING  
WOW EVENTS

ARIZONA:  
A SOUTHWESTERN  
OASIS

Cover Photo:  
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## destinations

- 44 Arizona: A Southwestern Oasis**  
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## Is a Cruise Meeting for Your Group?

More and more planners are focusing on cruises to offer attendees a whole different experience while also being able to better control costs. Despite lavish amenities, budgets for a cruise meeting or incentive program can sometimes be about the same as a land-based hotel or resort. In many cases, planners can charter an entire ship depending on size, and attendees know whomever they encounter is with their group, enabling greater networking opportunities.



As you are no doubt aware, there are always challenges to overcome in planning an event on land or sea. Our cover story "Cruise Meetings on the Rise" beginning Page 18 covers the advantages and challenges for planning meetings or incentive programs at sea.

If you are planning your first event on a ship, veteran planners suggest bringing in a third-party expert to help assure a successful program.

If you are considering a newly opened or renovated property, read about some "Fresh Venues" beginning on Page 12. In Atlantic City, NJ the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino opened last year, providing a major addition to the meetings market. If you prefer mountain views, the Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center in Aurora, CO opened last year and may be the perfect answer to your needs.

While there are many hotels and resorts pouring millions of dollars in to renovations, The Lodge at Sea Island Resort in Georgia discreetly positioned a barrier near the construction area where attendees could not see anything and there was no disruption of any activities while on property.

Always a popular choice for planners considering the Caribbean, the El San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico reopened last fall. Also recently reopened is the Caribe Hilton, celebrating its 70th anniversary this year. Both properties have undergone massive renovations.

As you read this issue you will see a new design illustrating our award-winning editorial content. Please send me your comments with any suggestions and let me know if you like our new, easy-to-read, uncluttered look.

Harvey Grotsky

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*Driftwood Putting Course*



*New Pool and Pool House*

The Lodge at Sea Island, surrounded by two championship golf courses and twice named the #1 Hotel in the U.S. by *U.S. News and World Report*, has introduced new meeting and event space, six cottages with sleeping rooms, a pool, pool house, and 18-hole putting course. Now with 57 sleeping rooms and more than 11,500 square feet of meeting and event space, The Lodge is the perfect location for your next incentive trip, board of directors, or intimate corporate meeting. An all-new state-of-the-art Golf Performance Center debuted in early 2019, adding even more opportunities for an exceptional experience.



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## DIRECT SELLING ASSOCIATION (DSA) HONORS BUY THE SEA WITH THE PARTNERSHIP AWARD

PLANTATION, FL — BUY THE SEA was honored by the U.S. Direct Selling Association (DSA) with the Partnership Award for its exceptional performance in incentive travel sourcing and operations. The award was presented to Shari Wallack, the company's founder and president, at the association's awards gala during the DSA's annual meeting in Austin, TX. "We're humbled and honored to be the first travel company to be recognized by the Direct Selling Association for the prestigious Partnership Award," Wallack says. Joseph N. Mariano, president and chief executive officer of DSA says, "DSA Award winners' programs demonstrate excellence, creativity and innovation in responding to the needs of the public, our consumers, our sales force, our members, and our communities." [www.buysea.net/buy-the-sea-in-the-news](http://www.buysea.net/buy-the-sea-in-the-news)



Shari Wallack, center, with award.

## HISTORIC HARBOR VIEW HOTEL UNVEILS \$15 MILLION, TOP-TO-BOTTOM RENOVATION, MARKING A NEW CHAPTER IN ITS 128-YEAR HISTORY

EDGARTOWN, MA — Offering a relaxing, yet productive atmosphere, the hotel boasts flexible meeting spaces with all new furnishings and modern amenities, a world-renowned food and beverage program, A/V resources in partnership with A2D Productions, and an onsite conference staff ready to address any and all needs. For meetings large or small, spaces at the hotel include: The Edgartown Ballroom, ready for 100-250 guests; The Menemsha Room, suited for 60-120 guests; The Chilmark Room, available for 24-60 guests; and The Great Lawn that, when tented, accommodates up to 250 guests. Harbor View Hotel invites groups to enjoy its newest offering, Afternoon Tea by the Sea, which enables attendees to focus on the company and

conversation, while taking in the incredible views of Edgartown Harbor and enjoying truly delectable treats. It includes a selection of hot teas, house-brewed iced tea and lemonade, assorted sandwiches, scones and sweets, a waived meeting room rental fee, complimentary parking and Wi-Fi. The limited-time experience requires a minimum of 10 guest rooms per night, and it is available for travel dates for the rest of the year. And of course, knowing that meetings are about much more than just what happens at the conference room table, groups can enjoy a wide range of island activities, including golfing, deep-sea fishing, sunset cruises, customized island tours, biking, shopping, horse-back riding and much more. [www.harborviewhotel.com](http://www.harborviewhotel.com)

## WALT DISNEY WORLD SWAN AND DOLPHIN RESORT HONORED AS A MARRIOTT EASTERN REGION HOTEL OF THE YEAR

LAKE BUENA VISTA, FL — The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort was recently named a Marriott Eastern Region Hotel of the Year — the first time the resort has received the distinction. The resort was awarded the accolade in the Full-Service Distinctive Premium category. The resort joined Marriott International, Inc. following the company's merger with Starwood in 2016. Marriott International encompasses a portfolio of more than 7,000 properties under 30 leading brands spanning 131 countries and territories. The recognition follows a \$150 million transformation of nearly the entire resort, including guest rooms, lobby areas and meeting space. [www.swandolphin.com](http://www.swandolphin.com)

## MICHAEL DOMINGUEZ TO TAKE THE HELM OF ASSOCIATED LUXURY HOTELS INTERNATIONAL

BOSTON, MA — Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI) has appointed hospitality industry veteran Michael Dominguez as its president and CEO. For the past seven years, Dominguez has served as senior vice president and chief sales officer for MGM Resorts International (MGMRI). Prior to his tenure at MGMRI, he directed sales development for Loews Hotels' growing portfolio as their vice president of global sales. In both roles, Michael provided strategic leadership, innovative business development, hands-on sales oversight and implementation of effective sales strategies in the MICE and transient segments. "Michael is highly respected and actively involved in leadership roles in our meetings and events industry. He is the ideal person for this position, with the right experience and industry network to lead our organization to new heights as we continue to focus on serving our distinguished members and valued customers," says Bill Dyer, chairman of the board of Associated Luxury Hotels, the parent company of ALHI. [www.alhi.com](http://www.alhi.com)



## IRF RELEASES NEW STUDY: WHAT TOP PERFORMING FINANCIAL SERVICES FIRMS DO DIFFERENTLY FOR INCENTIVES AND REWARDS

WASHINGTON, DC — The Incentive Research Foundation announces the release of What Top Performing Financial Services Firms Do Differently for Incentives and Rewards, the second release in the IRF's signature series, 2019 Top Performer Studies. The study identifies the non-cash rewards strategies and tactics used by top-performing financial services firms. The study also provides benchmarks and best practices to help financial services firms design effective non-cash rewards programs. The report summarizes findings from the data collected across multiple financial services firms and compares the results of top performing financial services firms to those of average performing financial services firms. The report first presents key overall findings, then drills down to results for sales reward programs, channel partner reward programs and employee reward programs. [www.theirf.org](http://www.theirf.org)

## HELMSBRISCOE HONORS ROSEN HOTELS & RESORTS SALES ASSOCIATE AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

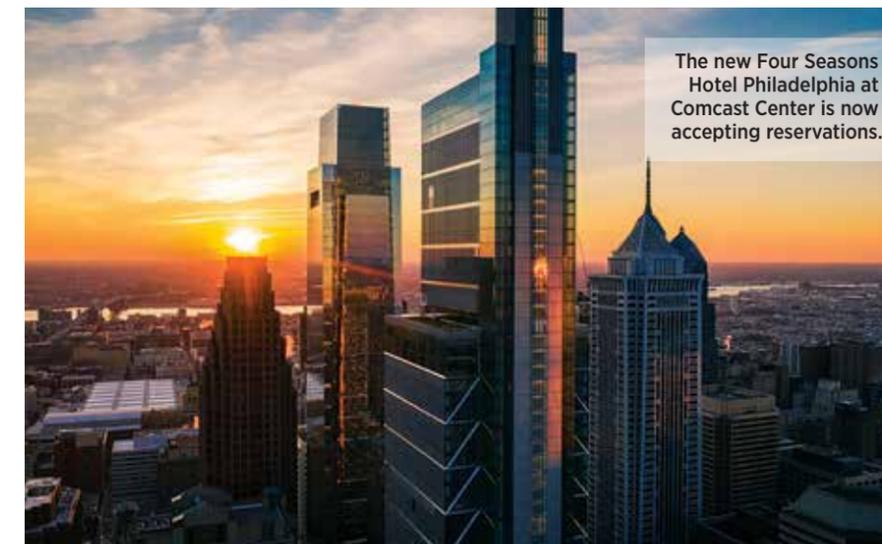
ORLANDO, FL — Jamie Cox, associate director of sales, Rosen Hotels & Resorts, was recently named "HelmsBriscoe Hotel Sales Person of the Year" representing an independent hotel during the HelmsBriscoe Annual Business Conference & Partner Fair in Houston, TX. Cox, who is based at Rosen Shingle Creek, has been with Rosen Hotels & Resorts for more than 19 years and is the second Rosen sales associate to be honored with the prestigious award in two years. Rosen Hotels & Resorts owns and operates a collection of eight Orlando hotels, including three convention-focused properties, which when combined, provide 3,635 contemporary guest rooms and suites and more than 700,000 sf of versatile meeting and event space, all ideally located in the hub of Orlando's International Drive meetings and tourism district. [www.rosenshinglecreek.com](http://www.rosenshinglecreek.com)



L-R, Carole McKellar, vice president, EMEA, HelmsBriscoe; Jamie Cox, associate director of sales, Rosen Hotels & Resorts; Leslie Menichini, vice president, sales and marketing, Rosen Hotels & Resorts and Richard Harper, executive vice president, HelmsBriscoe.

## A SKYLINE REDEFINED: FOUR SEASONS HOTEL PHILADELPHIA AT COMCAST CENTER CROWNS CITY'S TALLEST BUILDING

PHILADELPHIA, PA — The all-new Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center is located atop the 1,121-foot Comcast Technology Center in the city's vibrant downtown, offering unobstructed views from the 48th to 60th floors at the building's very summit. The 219-room hotel, which includes new restaurant concepts, a full-floor spa and wellness sanctuary and extensive meeting spaces, is now accepting reservations from arrivals starting later this year. Designed by Norman Foster of Foster + Partners, the new Comcast Technology Center has redefined the skyline of one of America's most storied cities. Visitors are soon reminded of the relationship between innovation and nature as they are greeted by stunning installations from celebrity floral designer Jeff Leatham, who is the artistic director of the hotel. Moments after check in, guests enter one of 180 rooms



The new Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center is now accepting reservations.

and 39 suites to find yet another expression of art and technology in Philadelphia Dorian, a composition of on-screen video and sound created exclusively for Four Seasons by musician, record producer and visual artist Brian Eno. In partnership with Comcast, all guest rooms and suites will offer the award winning X1 Video Experience, including approximately 300 channel options and a complimentary library of more than 50,000 movies and shows on demand, all searchable with the X1 voice remote. [press.fourseasons.com/philadelphia/hotel-news](http://press.fourseasons.com/philadelphia/hotel-news)

## CHICAGO MARRIOTT SCHAUMBURG COMPLETING MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR RENOVATION

SCHAUMBURG, IL — Chicago Marriott Schaumburg is expected to complete a \$22 million renovation this year. When finished, the property will be elegantly updated to revitalize the guest experience from check-in to checkout with reimagined meeting spaces and a transformed lobby with a revolutionary Great Room. Chicago Marriott Schaumburg also features an all-new MClub Lounge, fully remodeled indoor and outdoor pools, refreshed restaurant and bar with an elevated food and beverage menu, innovative and new guest rooms and state-of-the-art health club. Agreeably situated for gatherings, Chicago Marriott Schaumburg's more than 20,000 sf of meeting and event space may be adjusted to personalize each experience with modern technology and available services. The property is able to accommodate groups ranging from an intimate business meeting to a large 1,000-guest gala and more. [www.marriott.com](http://www.marriott.com)



Chicago Marriott Schaumburg will soon complete a \$22 million renovation.



The new Hyatt House Chicago/West Loop-Fulton Market is open for business.

## NEW HYATT HOUSE EXTENDED-STAY HOTEL OPENS IN CHICAGO'S WEST LOOP

CHICAGO, IL — Hyatt House Chicago/West Loop-Fulton Market — the area's newest hotel where visitors can stay and play — has opened. Hyatt House Chicago/West Loop-Fulton Market is located between the City's West Loop, one of Chicago's fastest-growing neighborhoods, and Fulton Market, a hub for corporate campuses including Google's Midwest hub and McDonald's new global headquarters. Hyatt House Chicago/West Loop-Fulton Market, the first Hyatt House hotel to open inside Chicago's city limits, rises 14 stories and includes 200 rooms, 67 of which are suites, plus a wide array of amenities and conveniences targeted primarily to business travelers. Should the need to host a business gathering arise, Hyatt House Chicago/West Loop-Fulton Market provides an ample amount of flexible meeting space. [www.hyatt.com](http://www.hyatt.com)

## YEAR-ROUND BOUTIQUE HOTEL, SEVEN HILLS, UNVEILS ENHANCED SPACES AND SERVICES FOR SOPHISTICATED MEETINGS IN THE BERKSHIRES

LENOX, MA — On the heels of its transformation from seasonal inn to stylish boutique hotel, The Berkshires' storied Seven Hills has unveiled new event spaces and services for groups meeting in Lenox. Ideal for high-level executive gatherings and corporate retreats, the former Gilded Age estate offers groups the opportunity to buy out the 57-room hotel for an exclusive experience. Seven Hills' original 1911 mansion, the Manor House, offers an open floor plan and 5,000 sf of air-conditioned function space. In warm weather, the hotel's Manor Terrace is perfect for a mid-morning break or an evening reception overlooking the

beautifully landscaped grounds. The sprawling lawn offers plenty of space for team-building activities and classic lawn games between meetings. Seven Hills' central location in Lenox — the heart of the Berkshires — is just minutes from abundant opportunities for group outings in the great outdoors, from a round of golf to zip lining. Groups meeting at Seven Hills can work with the hotel's preferred A/V partner and choose from a list of preferred caterers for food and beverage functions. Seven Hills' guest rooms and suites are well-furnished for business guests, including some with kitchenettes. [www.sevenhillsinn.com](http://www.sevenhillsinn.com)

The sprawling lawn offers plenty of space for team-building activities.



Seven Hills now has new event spaces and services for groups meeting in Lenox, MA.

# 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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# How to Get the Maximum ROI

## 5 Essential Strategies for Structuring Your Incentive Travel Program

BY MARK HERBERT

**W**hen it comes to incentive travel, the trip is the fun part. The trip is the reward. And while it's important to stick the landing and to put together a great itinerary for your participants, ultimately most of your ROI occurs before you leave on the trip. The trip is the carrot on the string, but the real value for the company will be generated by the actions your insurance agents and brokers take to earn that reward.

Furthermore, being able to present a verifiable ROI gives meaning to the trip itself. It solidifies the feeling of accomplishment your participants seek for earning the reward when they can see exactly how their actions positively impacted company goals.

With that in mind, here are several steps you can take throughout the planning process to maximize the ROI of your incentive travel program:

### 5 ESSENTIAL STEPS

**1.** It's important to ask the right questions before you plan your event. Doing so will ensure that you are able to structure your incentive travel program in a way that aligns with company goals.

Firstly, why are you offering an incentive travel trip? The more specific the goal, the more equipped you will be to achieve it. The difference between a

vacation and an incentive travel trip is its purpose. A vacation is a cost. An incentive travel program is an investment. If it's on the company dime, it's imperative that you can account for exactly why that money was spent and what was accomplished by doing so.

For example, if the goal is to increase sales, the structure of your incentive travel program might look different than it would if the objective is to retain top sales talent.

Secondly, who are you trying to influence? It is crucial to determine where in the organization the motivational and competitive benefits of an incentive travel program can be applied to best achieve the company's goals. Do you want to target brokerage agencies or independent agents? Which group has the most impact on the specific areas you are trying to improve?

Finally, you need to ask, what metrics should you use to track program success?

By answering these questions, you will be able to effectively tailor an incentive program that achieves meaningful results for the company.

**2.** Enhance the competitive aspects of your incentive program. Now that you're moving in the right direction and understand what the company is trying to accomplish with an incentive travel program, it's time to figure out how to maximize its effectiveness. For some of the participants, the trip might be motivation

enough, but part of running a successful organization is recognizing that different people respond to different motivators.

Depending on the size of the organization, you might consider using tiered travel rewards to recognize top performers and to create a sense of friendly in-house competition. One of the key differentiators between travel incentives and cash commission is that you can discuss and post about a trip in a way that you cannot with cash commissions. Offering higher-end locales for top performers enhances the status aspect of incentive travel, while still presenting achievable goals for middling performers.

Speaking of status, meeting planners and insurance agents can be a competitive bunch. Using leaderboards and recognition platforms that update in real-time boosts productivity across the board. The trip itself might be months away, but these kinds of competitive platforms offer immediate and consistent engagement with your incentive program.

**3.** Track data. Once you've identified your Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), it's essential that you track those metrics. Tracking the right data allows you to prove program success on the back-end and just as importantly provide a layer of accountability throughout the lifetime of your incentive program.

If you aren't making progress toward the goals you originally set out to achieve, it's better to find that out sooner rather than later. That way you can make the necessary adjustments

and hold the right people in the organization accountable. By the same token, if you are making progress, you can provide guided encouragement and recognition to keep things moving in the right direction.

**4.** Market your incentive program. Engagement is everything. An incentive travel program is only as effective as the participation of the professionals you are hoping to motivate. As previously mentioned, interactive

An incentive travel trip has the potential to generate a lot of positive emotions that are long-lasting and *impactful*.

competitive elements and recognition platforms are one way to boost engagement. But combine those with an effective marketing strategy, and your incentive travel program will consistently stay top-of-mind with your target audience.

Consider ways to engage your incentive program participants in an interactive manner, such as through an email campaign, tangible point certificates or even by integrating your incentive platforms with your employee portal. You may also consider offering your target audience a mobile app from where they can interface with your incentive platform and track their progress in real time.

**5.** Offer a phenomenal travel experience. Now that you have

a clear idea of strategy, it's time to end things with a bang. This is where site placement and event planning come to the forefront. You have to make sure to choose a travel destination that will motivate your target audience and make them feel like all of the effort they put in to earn the reward was worth it. You also want to give them something to talk about! Word-of-mouth and positive exposure through means like social media postings are excellent ways to promote your incentive travel program in the years to come – and the best part is that they don't require any sustained effort or additional costs on your end.

You may also want to consider making your incentive travel trip a themed event. This helps to differentiate one year's reward from the next and is also useful in promoting your incentive travel program in the stages before the trip. Additionally, you can align these themes with what will most resonate with your target audience. For instance, we have had clients do a contemporary music festival-themed event for a group of millennial-aged software developers and a golf-themed travel event for a slightly more middle-aged demographic. This is the type of thing your participants will talk about in the months to come, generating buzz for future travel events.

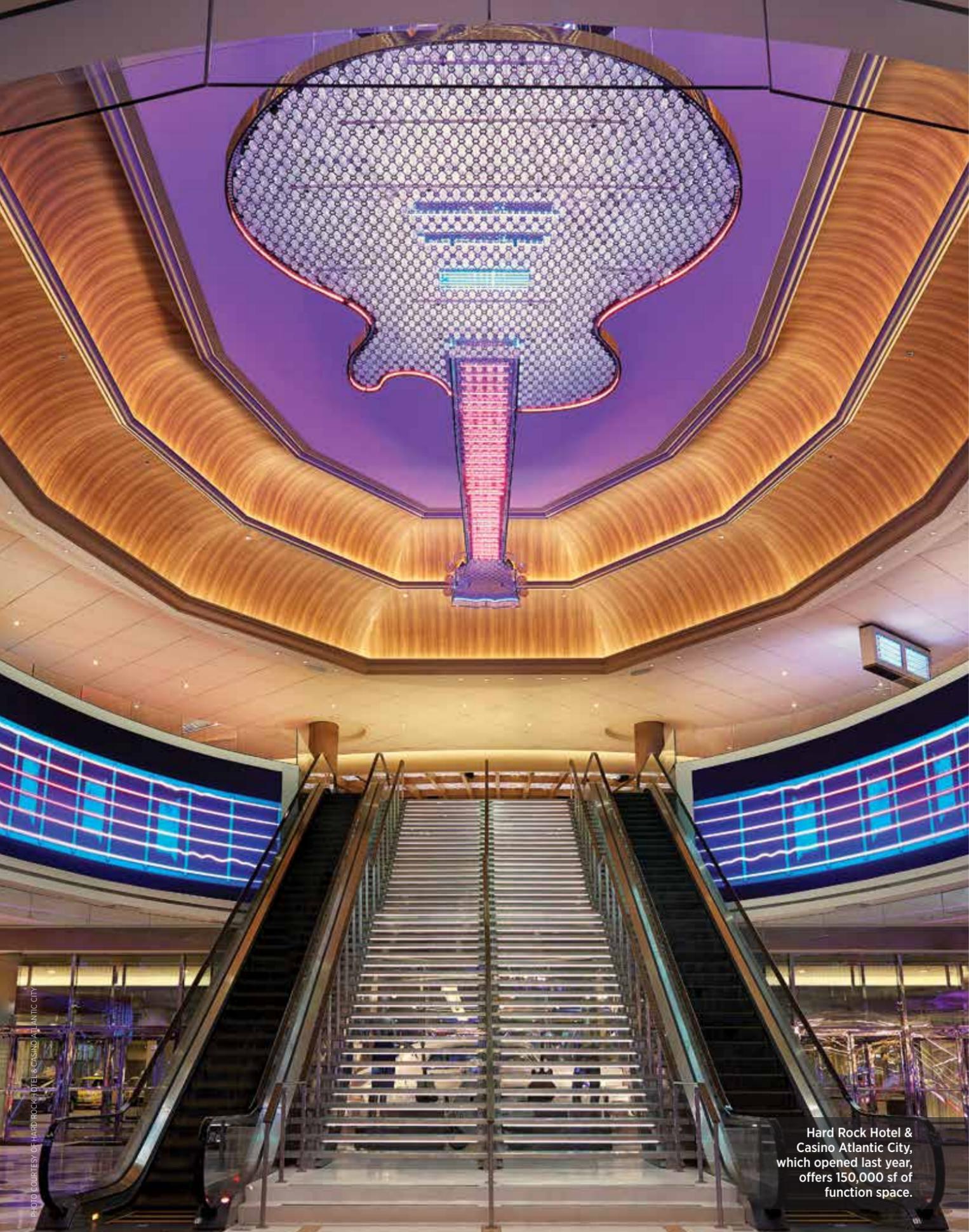
Beyond that, capitalize on the opportunity by branding your brochures and travel itineraries with company logos and design themes. An incentive travel trip has the potential to generate a lot of positive emotions that are long-lasting and impactful — it's important to anchor those emotions firmly to your company.

As you can see, a little bit of structure and strategic planning goes a long way. By following these five steps, you will be positioning the company to achieve the maximum ROI from your incentive travel program. Even better, once you have implemented this kind of approach and have built out the necessary structure, it becomes an integral part of the incentive travel program that requires very little maintenance from year to year. **I&FM**



THE AUTHOR

**Mark Herbert** is president and CEO of Incentive Solutions ([www.incentivesolutions.com](http://www.incentivesolutions.com)). He has more than 30 years of experience overseeing business operations within the incentives industry, including managing \$60 million of incentive travel programs. He spearheads the development of the most innovative channel incentive technology to optimize the planning and fulfillment of incentive programs and meetings. Incentive Solutions currently manages more than 220 programs, many of which are in the insurance industry. Mark Herbert may be reached at [mherbert@incentivesolutions.com](mailto:mherbert@incentivesolutions.com).



# Fresh Venues

Making a Choice Between Newly Opened or Renovated Properties

BY PATRICK SIMMS

One of the many advantages to being an FICP member is getting the “inside scoop” on new hotel renovations and openings from planners who have experienced the projects firsthand. Nearly every project looks good on paper, and of course every national account manager will rave about the new hotel or renovation, so it helps to get an impartial perspective from a colleague in order to inform one’s site choice. And FICP is teeming with opportunities for colleague interaction. “We are a very close-knit family,” says FICP member Lisa Ramsay, CMP, assistant vice president, event and meeting management with Protective Life Insurance Co. “We email each other a lot, and we see each other at the FICP annual conference in November.”

New on the FICP board since January is Jennifer C. Squeglia, CMP, owner of Warwick, RI-based RLC Events, Inc., whose clientele is largely insurance and financial companies. She also values the insights from FICP colleagues on these projects, especially given the sheer number of renovations in first- and second-tier

markets. “Almost every hotel I’m involved with these days is doing some renovation, huge or minor,” she says. “I think that’s definitely the upside of the market we’re in right now. Hotels are making money and they are all renovating, which I think is a win-win for everyone.”

One hotelier’s renovations tend to perpetuate upgrades among competitors, as no hotelier wants to be perceived as offering a subpar product. “Nowadays to stay competitive in the market you really have to stay on top of renovations, especially soft goods,” Ramsay says.

In addition, guest room technology is an area of continual development. For example, “the bedside tables all have USB ports built right into the side, unlike the old days when you had to plug in at the desk,” she observes. Some tech upgrades, while not visible, are still key to the attendee experience. “Many hotels are making significant improvements to their infrastructure with Wi-Fi,” Squeglia notes, “which is critical because nothing is worse than going to a meeting and not being able to connect. It’s not even an option not to have good Wi-Fi.”

Speaking of connecting, lobbies are becoming more

PHOTO COURTESY OF HARD ROCK HOTEL & CASINO ATLANTIC CITY

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City, which opened last year, offers 150,000 sf of function space.

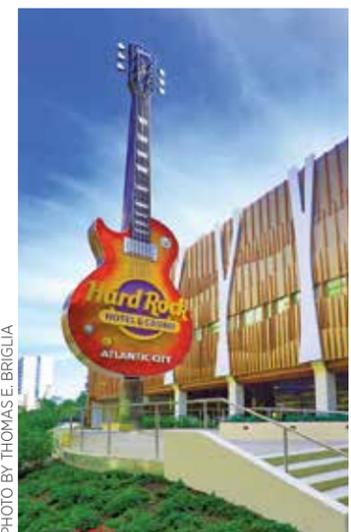


PHOTO BY THOMAS E. BRIGLIA



Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City, the only Atlantic City resort with direct beach access, offers views of The Wheel at Steel Pier.

PHOTO BY DANIEL NEWCOMB



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUBLETREE BY HILTON HOTEL ROCHESTER - MAYO CLINIC AREA

**DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Rochester - Mayo Clinic Area is two blocks from the Mayo Civic Convention Center in Rochester, MN.**

communal as part of many projects, affording groups spaces for informal networking. “I think that’s been happening across brands, and I’ve particularly seen it with the Marriott brand,” Squeglia says. “You walk into a lobby and there is a beautiful fireplace with couches. And I see a lot more people coming downstairs to work at a community table.” Outdoor gathering spaces are also becoming more prevalent. “I’ve seen the rise of the fire pit, as well as more pool cabanas,” she adds. “Obviously, cabanas are a great revenue source for the hotel, but I also think they’re a great benefit for attendees. People are so over-programmed in their everyday lives that it’s great to offer an activity they don’t need to sign up for in advance and can come and go as they please.”

Whichever features planners value in a property — from high-tech guest rooms to naturally lit meeting rooms to trendy restaurants — they are sure to find those features among the current crop of new and renovated hotels. Following is a sampling of these projects from the United States and Caribbean.

### NEWLY OPENED HOTELS AND RESORTS

In the context of Atlantic City’s long-running meetings industry, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City, which opened last year, is definitely a newcomer. And it is a major addition to the market from a meetings perspective. The 2,000-room property houses over 150,000 sf of function space, including boardrooms ideal for many insurance and financial groups. The 29,000-sf

Seminole Ballroom is divisible into six sections. All meeting spaces offer Wi-Fi access and are convenient to the guest rooms, many of which offer ocean views.

Groups who prefer mountain views have an enticing new option in Colorado with the opening late last year of

“Hotels are making money and they are all renovating, which I think is a win-win for everyone.”

**JENNIFER C. SQUEGLIA, CMP**  
Owner of RLC Events Inc.



the Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center. The 1,501-room property includes 14 presidential suites ranging from 1,500 to 2,200 sf. The amount of meeting space is more than proportionate to the guest room total: 512,987 sf of function space includes a 175,000-sf Exhibit Hall, 69 event rooms with a maximum of 78 breakout rooms and the 20,000-sf Aurora Patio. Other property highlights include eight F&B outlets, the Relâche Spa & Salon, and a variety of onsite aquatic diversions, from waterslides to a lazy river.

The Colorado Rockies are an iconic American experience, but so is the nation’s capital. A new offering by Hilton is a great option for groups in the highly competitive Washington, DC hospitality market. The 360-room Conrad Washington, DC, is located on New York Avenue, is adjacent to CityCenterDC shopping and dining. Meeting space is plentiful at 32,000 sf, including

two boardrooms, three meeting rooms and two pillar-less ballrooms. Attendees can also gather informally at a rooftop bar with views of the city’s monuments.

Ideally, a hotel will combine its meeting space with some onsite points of interest to spark conversation among attendees. Such is the case at the new The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston. Opened last year, the luxury property features 35,000 sf of conference space, including Uptown Houston’s largest ballroom at 16,000 sf. Conversation starters include a two-level Rolls Royce dealership, museum-quality American artworks throughout the hotel and a wine cellar with over 2,000 labels and rare vintages dating back to the 1800s.

A large-scale painting entitled “Everlasting Hope,” by artist Amy Donaldson, adorns the lobby of the new DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Rochester - Mayo Clinic Area, located two blocks from the Mayo Civic Convention Center in Rochester, MN. The 264-room property has its own 20,000 sf of function space. The Dr. John H. Noseworthy Hall and Doctors

Mayo Hall offer panoramic views, state-of-the-art A/V equipment and a variety of room configuration options.

### UPCOMING OPENINGS

Booking a meeting on a date soon after a new hotel opens presents attendees with the intriguing chance to be among the first to experience the property. But there are risks involved from a planner’s perspective. The primary risk is that the property won’t open in time for the meeting. Kim Sky, CMP, manager, strategic corporate meetings and events for CNA Insurance, describes such an experience: “We booked our annual conference at a new-build hotel that was to be opened a few months prior to our arrival, but it did not open until six months after our anticipated arrival. Two months prior to our contracted arrival, I had to scramble working with my sourcing partner and the city to find another location.” CNA’s law team

advised there was no legal recourse, but more importantly, “the hospitality industry is based upon partnerships, so pushing a hotel partner to the point of destroying the relationship would not have been beneficial,” Sky says. In hindsight, “It was a risk that we were aware of and took just to be one of the first few groups to enjoy a newly opened property. Moving forward, we will not take that timing risk, but rather book new-build properties one year after they say they are scheduled to open.”

Another familiar risk involved in booking a new property close to the opening date is that the staff will not be fully coordinated yet. For these reasons, Ramsay notes that she will not schedule a meeting at a new property “until they have opened or been open three to five months. I just will not put myself under the stress of being that first customer and having the possibility that the hotel does not open on time and then they have to move you to another property. Or you get there and maybe service levels are not what they should be at that point, because they’re still kind of working out the kinks,” she says. “I’m sure you can probably get really good pricing during that time, but I am not willing to do that. And my bosses expect of me that I make that call. I’m in this business, and I know what can happen and what I’ve seen happen before.”

There are a variety of new hotels on the horizon that will give planners the opportunity to try out their booking strategy. Hilton recently introduced an entirely new brand geared toward the meetings market. Signia Hiltons will offer a minimum of 500 guest rooms and 75 sf per key of flexible meetings and events space. Other features include communal lobbies and wellness experiences. One example is the Signia Indianapolis, slated to open in 2023. The more than-800 room hotel will be connected to the expanded Indiana Convention Center and include a 50,000-sf ballroom.

Another convention center hotel is debuting in Salt Lake City, UT, near the Salt Palace Convention Center. Scheduled to break ground later this year and open in 2022, the hotel will feature more than 700 guest rooms and about 62,000 sf of meeting space. The 28-story property will also include a pool deck with an event terrace, ideal for groups that want to gather in the city’s warm climate.

Sunny meetings also await at the

new Hard Rock Hotel Los Cabos, opening this year. Located on the shores of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, the all-inclusive resort offers 639 guest rooms and 56,000 sf of meeting space. All of the traditional Hard Rock hotels recreational amenities are onsite, from multiple pools to the Rock Spa. And with eight restaurants showcasing culinary cultures such as Asiatic, Italian and Brazilian, groups never need to leave the property for a diverse dining experience.

### NEWLY RENOVATED

The possibility of having one’s meeting disrupted also arises when booking close to the completion date of a renovation, or during the project. However, renovations are often carried out with no disruption to ongoing meetings, so a planner can usually have confidence — especially with a contract clause stipulating that the project will be completed



The Lodge at Sea Island Resort offers several alternatives for dining.

single guest room. Our program was in June and they were scheduled to be done by mid April,” she explains. “But there was a guarantee they would be done. It wasn’t much of a risk because they had huge groups coming in before us, so we knew they would get it done.” Nonetheless it’s important to discuss renovations at the contract stage. “At the end of the day it’s about communicating with your hotel partner; full transparency on both sides,” Squeglia says. “As a meeting professional, I want the hotel to renovate, it’s only going to help me and be a better experience for my guests. But let’s keep the communication lines open, because if there’s a jackhammer outside my meeting room door I’m not going to be happy.”

Squeglia is quite happy with the major renovations at the Cliff House Maine, where she is taking a 70-attendee financial group this year. “They did a significant renovation and it’s really

before the meeting, or that no disruptions will occur. Ramsay recalls a meeting she staged last year in Georgia at The Lodge at Sea Island Resort when the hotel was installing a pool and adding guest houses. “They were so discreet in the way they positioned the construction,” she says. “They had a barrier where you did not see the construction. If they had not told me they were putting in the pool and guest houses, I never would have known.”

Squeglia has also had a positive experience with a renovated hotel when she booked a group near the completion date. “We did a program last year at Hotel Viking in Newport, RI, for a financial institution. They were renovating every

spectacular. Three or four years ago I would never have considered it, but now it’s a luxury property,” she remarks. The Cliff House, a historic property that opened in 1872, completed a property-wide renovation and expansion over the last two years that redesigned its guest rooms, increased the guest room count to 225, and added a 4,300-sf ballroom, new pool, spa and fitness center.

Further down the east coast, groups will find a historic property in Washington, DC that recently completed a \$12 million rooms renovation. Completed in February, the redesign of the Omni Shoreham Hotel’s 834 guest rooms was inspired by the Art Deco era of the 1930s

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LODGE AT SEA ISLAND RESORT



PHOTO COURTESY OF CARIBE HILTON

hotel and incorporates local elements such as visuals of Washington, DC monuments. Larger windows and upgraded Wi-Fi are also featured in the renovated rooms at the Omni Shoreham, which offers groups 100,000 sf of meeting space.

In the Sunshine State, the Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld introduced 30,000 sf of new meeting space this year. The expansion offers groups more options and flexibility in the flow of their programs, according to hotel representatives. The space is close to the rest of the hotel but without flow-through traffic from other hotel guests, which can help with security for meetings that include sensitive or proprietary information. The hotel now has over 215,000 sf of function space, including the new 16,500-sf Peninsula Ballroom, six new breakout rooms and a new 1,000-sf boardroom. The expansion also features the latest event technology, such as a multiuse LED Media Wall that spans 50 sf.

In Miami, the The Ritz-Carlton Coconut Grove, Miami debuted a yearlong renovation in February. The hotel now features 115 redesigned guest rooms and a lobby with an avant-garde aesthetic, as well as pool and restaurant upgrades. The Ritz-Carlton's 13,000 sf of meeting space includes the 5,200-sf Ritz-Carlton Ballroom and an Executive Boardroom, complemented by outdoor terraces.

Significant renovations have been completed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, following Hurricane Maria. Last December, El San Juan Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton celebrated its grand reopen-

ing after a full restoration of the 388-room property. Blending Old World and modern design, the renovation included the guest rooms, poolside and oceanfront villas, public spaces, pools, cabanas and landscaping. The property offers 40,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including a newly redesigned Grand Ballroom and supplemented by 19,000 sf of lush outdoor event spaces.

Recently reopened following a \$100 million restoration and renovation program, San Juan's Caribe Hilton celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. Incoming groups will experience renovations to the hotel's 652 guest rooms and suites, eight food and beverage out-



El San Juan Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton reopened last fall.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EL SAN JUAN HOTEL

lets, fitness center, spa, tennis center and more. With 65,000 sf of meeting space, including four ballrooms, an auditorium and 24 meeting rooms, the new Caribe Hilton is well prepared to welcome groups to its reestablished grandeur.

#### ONGOING RENOVATIONS

The new Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City property is not the only major hotel development in Atlantic

The Caribe Hilton recently reopened following a \$100 million restoration after closing in 2017 due to damage from Hurricane Maria.

City. Harrah's Resort Atlantic City Hotel & Casino also made headlines when it announced a \$56 million guest room and suite renovation in its 507-room Coastal Tower. Scheduled to be completed this year, the new Coastal rooms will feature about 450 sf of space with a design similar to the resort's Bayview rooms. All Coastal rooms will include high-speed internet access, accessible charging stations and 55-inch LG LED televisions.

Ritz-Carlton has invested in its Coconut Grove property as well as its South Beach hotel, giving planners who are fans of the brand new reasons to consider Miami. In late 2019, the Ritz-Carlton, South Beach reopens after a multiyear, property-wide renovation that included its 375 guest rooms and suites, spa, Club Lounge, restaurants and bars, lobby, 20,000-plus sf of function space, and pool. The guest room color palette and motifs were inspired by Miami's origins as a vast botanical garden.

As Squeglia notes, a new property or a transformed one such as the Ritz-Carlton, South Beach is a novel experience that can entice attendees, particularly potential incentive qualifiers. "We have attendees who are very well traveled, insurance agents and brokers who have been at all these beautiful properties, and when you can offer them a first-time experience at a brand-new property, it definitely gives you an edge," she says. "So there is a risk with a new property, but a lot of reward there too."

As exciting as a new or renovated hotel may be, clients should bear in mind that quality service is just as important as quality facilities, if not more so. "The property can be gorgeous, but if the staff isn't well trained, it doesn't matter," Squeglia adds. "You can tell right away if they're trained to be kind, warm and welcoming, and to get you through a tough situation. That's huge, and that's really what participants remember. So it's not only about investing in making your hotel beautiful, but in making your staff the best they can be." **I&FMM**

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Steve O'Malley, Michael Guerriero, and David Peckinpaugh (pictured left to right) Maritz Global Events



Norwegian Bliss features various themed dining areas and bars and a two-story go-kart track on its top deck.



# Cruise Meetings on the Rise

Meetings and Events at Sea Offer Many Advantages

BY DAVID SWANSON

**F**ive-star service, built-in entertainment, better control of costs and that ever-elusive element of focus that a captive audience provides — these are some of the key reasons meeting planners cite when discussing programs based on cruise ships.

In addition to an ever-changing backdrop of sea and sky and a daily roster of new ports upon which to call, the sea can provide a solid alternative to land-based events.

It's selling points such as these that satisfied Sabrina Hogan, CMP, director, meetings and events for Columbia, SC-based Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company. For a Leaders Conference last year attracting 590 employees, Colonial Life chartered Regent Seven Seas Explorer.

"The size of this ship was perfect for our Leaders Conference," Hogan says. "Our attendees had an all-exclusive experience

with luxurious accommodations and service. We have chartered Regent ships many times over the years, and the impeccable service that they provide keeps us returning. Their ships are the right size for our group, and when you charter, the space is yours to use as you wish."

Debuting as Regent's fourth ship in 2016, the \$450 million, 750-passenger Seven Seas Explorer was the line's first new ship in a decade. Aboard Explorer, every cabin is a suite and each suite measures more than 300 sf. Gourmet cuisine is designed for the most discerning passengers, while 2,500 pieces of artwork include original pieces by Picasso and Chagall. Despite such lavish amenities, Hogan says her budget for a cruise program is about the same as a land-based resort.

"But our attendees have a whole different experience," Hogan adds. "When using a resort, we do not provide lunch and dinner

PHOTO BY DANNY LEHMAN

every night. They are also responsible for the cost of their tours. On a cruise, all these things are included for the attendees. It is also much easier to manage a budget. You can include everything, even the tours, making it truly an all-inclusive experience. And our group loves networking time – having a day at sea provides this. When chartering the ship, your attendees know that whomever they encounter is with the same group and starting up a conversation is much easier.”

Hogan notes that aboard a cruise ship, some elements of a program might face limitations. “You have to get a bit more creative with the space, but Regent was more than willing to brainstorm ideas on how best to make the space work for our group. Once onboard, the crew helps you accomplish everything they can – things that you might have struggled with during the planning phase are, in most cases, taken care of easily. If you need larger tables for dinners, they can accommodate. After the first night of the cruise, they knew our group was going to be utilizing room service late at night so they changed the staff’s schedule to handle the late night orders in a timely manner.”

Hogan also uses a third-party planner, primarily to assist with the contract negotiations.

“By the time I get the contract, he has already worked out most of the kinks,” Hogan says. “He knows what our legal department will require and exactly what to ask for. He then

becomes my convention services manager. I recommend using someone like this so that you have one contact. He has been a lifesaver when things occur, because he knows the inner workings of the ship and exactly who to contact to make things happen. There have also been times that he handled issues before I even knew they were an issue. Having him as part of my team reduces my stress significantly.”

A sea-based incentive does have

“When chartering the ship, your attendees know that whomever they encounter is with the same group and starting up a conversation is much easier.”

**SABRINA HOGAN, CMP**  
Director, Meetings and Events  
Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company



some limitations, and Hogan says on this cruise Wi-Fi was an issue. “It was very slow and connectivity was a problem. Also, our media crew was not able to adjust any of the lighting in the show lounges. The cruise line had them set for their entertainment. We sometimes have to supplement the stage lighting in order to accommodate our needs.” These types of hurdles are another reason Hogan recommends the services of an experienced cruise planner.

“If you have never held a meeting a sea, use a third-party,” she concludes. “They will save you lots of time and headaches.”

In February 2020, Regent will be adding a second Explorer-class ship,

Seven Seas Splendor, and an additional sister will join the fleet in 2023. But Regent is only one piece of the trifecta of cruise lines operating under the banner of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd. Katina Athanasiou, CITP, vice president of charters, meetings and incentives, oversees not just Regent, but Oceania Cruises and Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) – three distinctly different operations catering to all price sectors of the cruise market, in all regions of the globe, with 29 ships.

At Oceania, the line’s Regatta-class ships are going through a renovation designed to create a new sophisticated and modern look. Oceania Cruises also announced plans for two new 1,200-passenger ships, dubbed Allura class, scheduled to arrive in 2022 and 2025.

Oceania recently completed a refresh of the Sirena as part of the line’s \$100 million OceaniaNext program of continuous improvements. The upgrade included some features that were not installed on the Insignia, the first of six ships in the OceaniaNext upgrade sequence. They include new doors and full-length mirrors in each cabin, new wall sconces in the spa, additional crystal chandeliers in the public spaces and stair lobbies, and 100-volt sockets on each side of the bed in cabins.

New art also has been commissioned, including a work by the line’s executive culinary director, Jacques Pepin, which will hang in the restyled Bar Ista, the ship’s social hub and cof-

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Norwegian Joy, originally intended for the Chinese market, was transferred to North America. It offers the Vibe Beach Club, left, and the Oceanplace Lobby, right. Joy offers cruises year-round to Alaska's west coast, the Mexican Riviera and the Panama Canal from Miami and Los Angeles.

fee bar. At the center of the ship, the deck-and-a-half tall French-glass mirror that crowns the ship's reception lobby and grand staircase displays a hand-painted willow tree meant to symbolize "balance, learning, growth and harmony," according to Oceania. Nearby in the reception lobby is a commissioned piece by Soumiya Lakshmi Krishnaswamy that "seeks to capture the spirit of adventure that lies in the sea," Krishnaswamy says. The 684-passenger ship, acquired in 2016 from Princess Cruises, received \$40 million in improvements before being put into service at that time by Oceania.

Following a \$50 million renovation, NCL transferred the 2-year-old, 3,800-passenger Norwegian Joy, originally intended for the Chinese market, to North America. This November the line will debut Norwegian Encore, the last of the 4,000-passenger, Break-away-plus ships.

Other cruise lines are also focused on the meetings and incentive market and polishing their wares for an exacting audience. Visiting more than 400 destinations and all seven continents annually, Seabourn Cruise Line competes with Regent for the high-end market, starting with its three all-suite, 450-passenger Odyssey-class ships. Unique among many cruise ships, all guests can be accommodated for a meeting or presentation in The Grand Salon theater, or in The Restaurant for Gala Dinners.

Two equally deluxe 600-passenger

ships were added to the Seabourn fleet in recent years, Encore and Ovation. Meanwhile, Seabourn's next venture is a pair of ultra-luxury, purpose-built expedition ships that will launch in 2021 and 2022. The 264-passenger ships, a perfect size for charters, will take guests to even more remote places than currently found on the exotic Seabourn schedule.

Silversea also has a collection of intimate luxury ships, ranging from the 100-passenger Silver Galapagos to

"In our experience of holding events at resorts and on cruise ships, the cruise option can save up to 10 to 20 percent, depending on the itinerary."

**ROLAND NAVARRO**

President  
Seven Seas Corporate Cruises and Events



the line's newest ship, the 596-passenger Silver Muse. Several ships are currently on order, including Silver Moon, a sister to the popular Silver Muse, and Silver Origin, a purpose-built ship destined for the Galapagos Islands — both arriving in 2020.

A recent European program conducted by a life insurance company aboard Silver Spirit took advantage of the ship's lengthening last year that added a new midsection. Originally built almost 10 years ago, Silver Spirit's "stretching" added 34 cabins, bringing its capacity to 608 passengers.

"I used this ship before and liked the size, and I liked the fact that there were

multiple dining options and a variety of spaces on the ship where people could gather," explained the planner. "The caliber of the ship — in terms of service, size of rooms, number of larger suites, number and type of restaurants — works for the profile of my group. We can leverage the vessel for all of our functions."

In contrast to those who recommend hiring a third-party to oversee details, this planner preferred to stay closely involved in the process.

"For some planners just going along with what the ship does on a regular cruise is fine," she explains. "A meeting planner can help if you are a novice. But for us it is all about customization, and you really need to understand what you are working with, what is doable, and then partnering with the ship's staff to make it all happen. I am very hands-on and work direct, but my

experience is the staff welcomes that opportunity to work outside the box. It is work but can be worth the effort for sure in terms of achieving your business objective and client satisfaction. Again, it is a partnership."

What kinds of challenges did this planner experience?

"Planning can be hard since the staff on the ship is always moving," she says. "So until the last 30 days, getting details firmed up is tough. The back office of Silversea and the sales rep worked hard for us, but the next time around I would do a face-to-face planning meeting in advance, if possible. The shipboard staff worked very hard to accomplish

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our objectives.”

She adds, “We find that we have to bring in all of our own A/V equipment for the high-end meetings and shows we host. But we supplied all the unique requirements — including booking entertainment, and providing and supporting all of our own production for our meetings and entertainment.”

Although the planner suggests that a European cruise is fairly comparable in price to a land-based event, she felt the guarantee of a contract in U.S. dollars makes budgeting easier. And she finds any challenges that exist are worth surmounting in the end.

“There are always challenges to overcome in planning any event — land or sea,” she explains. “But on the ship we have a captive audience and we find that, with all the people we are trying to make connections with, the sea program allows us time to do that.”

She adds, “Explore options and be brave, and see what the possibilities can be.”

Royal Caribbean Cruises last year acquired a majority stake in Silversea, providing the parent company with a pure luxury play within its family of cruise lines. The Royal Caribbean brand itself represents a fleet of 26 ships, including several of the largest at sea, carrying up to 5,600 passengers. In contrast to smaller vessels, those ships themselves are often the destination.

Royal Caribbean’s main theaters seat up to 1,411 guests, while other venues include ice skating rinks, “neighborhoods” such as Central Park replete with thousands of plants and trees, and conference centers that accommodate up to 400 seated. Royal Caribbean is the only fleet with dedicated conference centers on every ship. The line also works to accommodate planners desiring shorter programs. Three-, four-, and five-night cruises out of PortMiami and Port Canaveral, east of Orlando in Brevard County, visit Perfect Day at CocoCay, Royal Caribbean’s newly revitalized private island in the Bahamas, which came online for cruisers this year.

Royal Caribbean Cruises’ second-



Oceania Cruises has plans for two new 1,200-passenger ships.

PHOTO BY JERRY WYSZATYCKI

largest brand is Celebrity Cruises, which launched Celebrity Edge last December, the line’s first new ship in six years. The 2,900-passenger Edge represents a completely new ship design for Celebrity, and received kudos for blending innovation, technology and comfort. The Meeting Place aboard Edge is a

1,970-sf venue equipped with 85-inch LED screens and other state-of-the-art A/V features, and can seat up to 200 guests, theater-style.

Cruise Critic editors selected Edge as the best new ship of the year, and lauded the Magic Carpet that transforms from a tender platform to an al fresco sushi station, and the Infinite Verandas that convert from an ocean view to a balcony with the push of a button. Four more Edge-class ships are on order, including Celebrity Apex, arriving in Spring 2020.

Also new for Celebrity Cruises is the 100-passenger, purpose-built Celebrity Flora, designed specifically for cruising the Galapagos Islands — and for rewarding top performers with something beyond merchandise. Flora will also place an emphasis on corporate responsibility — the ship is built with dynamic positioning to “anchor” without anchors and solar panels to supplement electricity. Past Galapagos Celebrity guests have planted over 38,000 trees. The intimate vessel arrives next summer.

For a leader’s conference with a U.S.-based life insurance company last year, Roland Navarro, president of Seven Seas Corporate Cruises and Events, recommended Celebrity Summit for the group of 600 attendees.

“In this particular case the client was also looking at resorts in the Caribbean,” Navarro says. “After hurricane Irma and Maria hit the Caribbean in late 2017, many resorts shut down and some are still not open today. They are very grateful to have selected a ship for their event and not the resort they considered.” Celebrity Summit is homeported in the Caribbean during the winter, doing seven-night, back-to-back cruises. Navarro’s group needed only five days, but that allowed Celebrity to customize the itinerary out of San Juan. “We were in a different destination every day of the cruise. It was a five-night itinerary and included St. Maarten, Antigua, St. Barts and St. Thomas.”

Celebrity Summit, built in 2001, normally accommodates 2,158 passengers, but as Navarro’s group had chartered

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the entire ship, they had full access to all public spaces.

“It was a good fit because of Celebrity Cruises’ food and beverage reputation along with their level of service,” Navarro explains. “The receptions and private dinners were flawless. The client also wanted the ship to be all-inclusive, so Celebrity included optional items to be added into the charter price, such as specialty restaurant cover charges, gelato and specialty coffees, room service and the premium beverage package. Our main planning contact from Celebrity, Angelica Camacho, charter manager, sailed with us. She is a true professional who gets things done. Everyone onboard the ship has worked with her many times before so she was the perfect shoreside extension onboard to implement the operational plan.”

The group used the Summit’s main show lounge for its Awards Show, a room outfitted with lasers, lighting, sound and projection screens. Navarro notes how these are add-ons that would typically need to be paid for at a resort, but are customarily included for a cruise meeting, one of several pricing advantages cruises have over traditional land-based programs.

“In our experience of holding events at resorts and on cruise ships, the cruise option can save up to 10 to 20 percent, depending on the itinerary,” Navarro says. “Since the cruise line does not charge for room rental and A/V equipment use, and because most of the pub-

Silversea, which offers cruises to Alaska, has ships ranging from 100 passengers to 600 passengers.

COURTESY OF SILVERSEA CRUISES



lic rooms are themed, it saves on the décor and production budgets. And as most costs are all upfront, the cruise offers better budget control. Clients also feel that a cruise offers better security than a land resort.”

Navarro says the another reason cruise-based events work is that the participants are literally a captive audience. “At a resort, once the events are over guests can leave the property,” he says. “On a ship, once onboard, you know where they are. On a charter the only guests aboard are your guests, so the networking and bonding is evident in all the public spaces during their free time.”

Navarro cautioned that there are still unique considerations that must be taken into account when planning a cruise program.



“You need to know the seating and space capacities for all public rooms,” Navarro explains. “Many tables are bolted down and can’t be moved, so don’t assume making changes will always be possible. You need to be certain that the business end of the event can be accommodated first — the sleeping rooms, F&B and other things will all fall into place.”

He continues: “Make sure you bring all the computer dongles you have to make sure they are compatible to the equipment onboard for presentations. Make sure you know what equipment is onboard so you can bring what you need to make your production work.”

These kinds of details are reasons planners doing their first event on a ship may want to consider bringing in a third-party expert.

“For someone doing this for this first time, there are so many things that need to be negotiated upfront or they can become challenges down the line and once onboard,” Navarro says. “We always suggest the use of a third party experienced in cruise events to help mitigate the charter/group rate, the inclusions, etc. It will save you money.” **L&FMM**

Regent Seven Seas Cruises offers luxury cruise packages for any budget. A second Explorer-class ship, *Seven Seas Splendor*, and another ship will join the fleet in 2023.

PHOTO BY STEVE BEAUDET



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# The Art of Negotiation

Getting Specifics Nailed Down is of the Utmost Importance

BY MAURA KELLER



PHOTO COURTESY DEPOSIT PHOTOS

When it comes to contract negotiations, Genny Castleberry, CMP and director of sourcing at Brightspot Incentives & Events, understands what it takes to establish a contract that is beneficial for all parties involved.

“Being a good negotiator includes ensuring that every hotel contract term is understandable,” Castleberry says. “The best advice I heard from an industry expert is have the contract written clearly enough that it can stand alone and be implemented by people not directly involved in the contracting process.” Indeed, as contracts continue to get more and more comprehensive and, quite frankly, more and more confusing, understanding the art of contract negotiation for events large and small is paramount within the financial and insurance meetings industry.

## CONTRACTS THAT WORK

When establishing a contract, meeting planners should look for anything in the contract that might cause cost-creep or create unnecessary liability for their organization. As Grant Walsh, an attorney with Culhane Meadows, PLLC in Dallas, TX explains, hotel and event venue contracts are notoriously one-sided and they usually include plenty of subtle clauses that allow hotels and event venues wriggle room to assess additional charges and fees for almost everything. They also typically contain strict indemnity provisions whereby the group assumes liability for both its own damages as well as many types of damages that may occur to the venue.

That’s why contract language should be extremely specific and list dates, calculations and amounts so that both parties clearly understand any liability. “Hotels tend to include language that protects only them and puts all the liability on the client,” Castleberry says. “Be sure to thoroughly review all clauses and ensure both hotel and client share the same risk.”

Danielle Miles, director of conferences and meetings for metroConnections, says the various clauses referencing items that are legally binding often need more discussion.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTONELLA COLELLA

“I find that many times the clauses and concessions part of contracts are most heavily ‘red-lined’ by procurement,” Miles says. “Cancellation, performance and associated damages need to be spelled out and agreed up by all parties.”

So what are the biggest areas of negotiating that planners should be aware of and what are the best tactics for negotiating contracts? Miles says anything having to do with penalties and damages. Attrition also needs to be spelled out to clients and addressed

“Have the contract written clearly enough that it can stand alone and be implemented by people not directly involved in the contracting process.”

**GENNY CASTLEBERRY, CMP**  
Director of Sourcing  
Brightspot Incentives and Events



well in advance if a client is in jeopardy of not meeting attrition.

Antonella Colella, Esq., co-founder and CEO of the Apolline Group, LLC, an event and meeting planning company, says negotiating the deposit also is key, including how much money needs to be put down in order to reserve an organization’s spot?

“You should try to negotiate this down as low as you can,” Colella says. “Also, how are the payments due? Some contracts will ask you for escalated

Seasoned planners and attorneys agree that most meeting contract pitfalls and problems can be avoided by clearly explaining expectations and requirements.

payments with a final payment due at the time of your event. Other contracts will require two payments, one at contract signing and the other lump sum at the time of your event. Negotiate the one that works best for you and your client.”

A meeting planner should know what happens to the deposit if the event has to be cancelled. While cancelling an event is never something a meeting or event planner wants to think about, things unfortunately do happen that can force an event to be cancelled.

“We have clients whose events are dependent on funding,” Colella says. “When

funding does not come through as expected, cancellation of the event has been the only option. If this happens, you want to know where you stand. There may be liquidated damages tied to terminating the contract, so pay attention to this section.”

Attrition also is a very important aspect of contract negotiation. If a meeting planner has a contract with a hotel, the attrition clause will set forth how many no-shows the group will be responsible to pay for.

“The attrition clause and termination clauses are always the most challenging ones to negotiate because venues and hotels do not want to lose money on reserving rooms that don’t get used and prepping food and beverage for attendees that do not attend,” Colella says. Also, the indemnification clause may require more discussion. This clause determines which party should compensate the other in the case of a loss or damages incurred in connection with the contract and should be reciprocal in nature.

“For example, if your contract calls for 100 guests with a 10% attrition rate, it means that you won’t be responsible if 10 people fail to attend,” Colella says. “However, if 20 people fail to show up, then you are responsible for paying for the additional 10 no-shows. While it is difficult to negotiate away this clause, you should push for favorable numbers so that you are not left with a huge payment that you weren’t expecting.”

The scope of work is an aspect of the contract negotiations that is critical for vendor contracts. It needs to be clear exactly what services an event planner is receiving for the money being paid. “A well-defined scope of work will save you time and headaches on the day of your event,” Colella says.

The contract should include an impossibility clause or force majeure clause that says either the hotel or the client can cancel with no penalties for events beyond your control — such as acts of God, labor strikes and other things outside your control. Make sure what is and is not included in this provision is fully understood.

Other important clauses to succinctly clarify include:

- Mutually acceptable dates for holding the same or another meeting at the property within a certain time frame.
- A sliding scale that allows room costs to be lower the further the new meeting is from the cancellation date.

- A reduced cancellation fee to be paid along with a substitute meeting.
- Alternatively, ask the hotel to help find a comparable property and pay the difference in cost.
- Reserve the option to choose audiovisual vendors. Don’t get locked into a clause that requires you to use an A/V supplier associated with the hotel because costs may be higher.

Miles suggests that these clauses should be addressed early on and if not appropriate for the client or situation, should be red-lined and accompanied with a hotel contract adden-



COURTESY OF CULHANE MEADOWS PLLC

Grant Walsh, an attorney with Culhane Meadows, PLLC, who plans the firm’s events, above, says hotel and event venue contracts can sometimes be notoriously one-sided.

dum. “In my company, we work with our legal team to prepare our company addendum that holds the clauses and concessions most important for us to ask for on behalf of our clients,” Miles says. “This goes with each and every contract we negotiate. Many times, planners wanting to get the ‘deal done’ will unknowingly miss including clauses that protect their client and/or the agency for which they are employed. Make a checklist to refer to

when reviewing each and every contract to be sure all details are covered.”

## INTRICACIES OF CONTRACTS

Matthew Fornaro, an attorney in Coral Springs, FL who frequently works in contract law, says the use of other third-party vendors is another concern. “Make sure the contract says who is responsible for bringing in third-party vendors,” Fornaro says. “If it is you, use the same stringency in reviewing contracts and going over things. One of the biggest mistakes meeting planners and others make is not actually reviewing the contract and just signing it as written. You have the opportunity to ask questions and negotiate terms in the contract. It is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.”

Castleberry also recommends seeking as many concessions as possible. If the property won’t budge on rates, request perks such as room upgrades, complimentary receptions, free conference rooms, suites, lower resort fees and free gym admission.

And remember that most venues are flexible because they understand that no two planners or events may be alike, and each one has special needs. Colella suggests that when reviewing a contract, its best to request changes on three to five clauses. Sending back a contract full of mark-ups is not the best way to start a negotiation. If a meeting planner asks for three to five, they have a better chance of getting most of the changes accepted.

“Take the contract and mark up all terms that you do not understand or agree with and bring it to the venue’s attention,” Fornaro says. “Most of the time, they will be willing to explain the contract to you and negotiate with you. Do not feel bad about suggesting changes, that is the nature of the business.”

## MISTAKES TO AVOID

A major challenge in planning and negotiating an event contract is understanding the food and beverage element. “Most venues offer ‘free’ event

space as long as the group commits to spending a certain minimum on in-house catering,” Walsh says. The key is to make sure that the minimum spend commitment is reasonable and likely to be satisfied by the group’s anticipated needs. It’s never fun to get a bill at the end of an event where you’re paying extra money just to meet your minimum F&B obligation for something you didn’t actually receive.

Mauricio Giordano, CTO at InEvent, says when you’re talking contracts, you need to be clear and straight to the point. “Clarity is a key driver of repeated, successful deals,” Giordano says. “Make sure that, after reading the whole contract, you’re able to calculate the full amount you’ll have to pay for that vendor.”

The level of support is also another very important matter. “Event planners need to be great risk managers, which means being hypothesis driven at all times. If anything goes wrong, are you going to have that service provider there with you to fix the problem?” Giordano asks.

As Giordano explains, for many event planners it feels comfortable to think that everything will work out perfectly and you won’t have any issues. “But that’s just a common trick your brain plays with you when you’re absorbed in the endless tasks you have to manage as an event planner,” Giordano says.

One key mistake surrounding contract negotiations that event planners make is not paying enough attention to eventual fines on contracts — not only the fines provoked by the service level agreement, but also those ones concerning your supplier history of legal conduct.

“Are you always going for the cheapest vendor? There’s a reason why they’re cheaper than competitors,” Giordano says. “Do a thorough background check and make sure you’re willing to work with this supplier. The last thing you want is being held responsible for legal charges incurred by partnering with a provider that has problems with the law.”

If you have access to an attorney, either in-house or on retainer, make sure to have them take a look at the contract. An attorney experienced

with these types of contracts will be able to spot problematic clauses quickly and can provide tips on negotiation strategy. If an attorney is not as easily accessible, an experienced meeting planner will be able to spot pitfalls.

“Saying you didn’t understand what something means is never a valid legal defense, so it’s essential to understand what your organization is agreeing to in the contract,” Walsh says. “Asking questions to the venue’s sales rep is not a smart way to protect your group because many of the salespeople are merely using standard contract templates and they often don’t understand much of the legal jargon themselves. Given how much money can be at stake, event planners should always ask ques-

“A well-defined scope of work will save you time and headaches on the day of your event.”

**ANTONELLA COLELLA, ESQ.**  
Co-founder and CEO  
Apolline Group, LLC



tions to a seasoned hospitality lawyer before signing an event contract. It’s always better to spend a little of the event budget on legal review up front rather than getting sucked into a very expensive contract dispute.”

Planners also often make the mistake of overlooking the impact of taxes and fees to the bottom line, which can easily add 35% or more to the total costs. As Walsh explains, hotels and event centers are notorious for quoting their base prices as low as possible to appear more competitive, but then they pad their profit margin by adding various mandatory service/convenience fees, or surcharges of 22% to 28% for everything from catered meals to A/V services. Plus, of course, sales tax can add another 8% to 12% and hotel taxes can be 15% to 25% depending on the location.

“Nothing sours the taste of a successful event like getting a bill at the end that’s 25% to 35% higher than budgeted,” Walsh says. The taxes and fees are rarely negotiable — except so-called ‘resort fees’ that can often be waived by

the salesperson — but they need to be taken into account as part of the overall event budget.

“An event planner has no shortage of tasks to accomplish. One of the main ones, as a project leader, is to be surrounded by a competent team,” Giordano says. “Consult with a lawyer and an accountant. They’re bureaucracy specialists. And that doesn’t mean you can solely rely on their views. Don’t be afraid of contracts. Read them and discuss that in detail with reliable professionals. Also, run long-term partnerships as much as you can. When you’re looking to hire a service, you’ve a problem to be solved. There’s nothing better than knowing you can count on someone that’s proven to be reliable.”

Remember, as an event planner, you’re the product owner and manager of the meetings and events that you organize. So, before going after any supplier, you have to make sure what are your expectations regarding quantity, quality and how the performance is going to be measured.

“You need to review possible weaknesses on your event goals, because that could cause disorientation to your vendor when putting the clauses down on a contract,” Giordano says. “Have your goals clear in your mind, so it’ll be easier and quicker to detect confusion not only with vendor, but with all of the stakeholders.”

Finally, Walsh recommends meeting planners always research the desired travel market and be familiar with the seasonal ups and downs so that they can target a more cost-efficient time of year when venues in that area are more willing to make pricing concessions.

“Getting at least three competing bids from other comparable venues in the same or similar markets is essential because knowledge is power during contract negotiations,” Walsh says. “Finally, always ask the venue to make additional and specific concessions, such as a certain number of room upgrades or a complimentary welcome reception for your group with hors d’oeuvres, beer, and wine. You just might be surprised when the sales rep says ‘Yes!’”

IFMM

# MOUNTAIN MEETINGS

High-Altitude Events Give Attendees a Unique Change of Pace

BY DAVID SWANSON

The Omni Grove Park Inn is 2 miles from downtown Asheville, NC, and features golf and outdoor venues offering mountain views.

COURTESY PHOTO

**T**ried-and-true conference destinations such as Las Vegas and Chicago maximize amenities of size, access and service that meeting planners look for in creating a program for high-profile corporate events. What most top meeting destinations don't offer is a change of pace from the hectic city life that most of us wade through day-in and day-out.

For an alternative, a program set in a mountain location offers a literal change of scenery from city activities. Such was the case for Rhiana Bible, who planned a series of summer regional meetings while she was senior travel director for Maritz Travel.

"What's nice and unique about having a mountain environment is the wealth of opportunities for adventure within the confines of having to work," Bible says. "Not only is there a surplus of activities for all, but the slightly cooler temperatures from the higher elevations are refreshing."

Adds Allison London, executive assistant and special event planner at Longitude Capital, "Let's face it, when you work in the financial sector you're likely spending long hours in front of a computer day after day. Most communication, even with coworkers, is done electronically. What better way to break the monotony and routine than to throw in some high-altitude fun?"

From the Sierras of California to Colorado to the Adirondacks of New York, there are mountain options in varying degrees of capacity, accessibility and luxury. Here are firsthand reports from six unique locations to consider.

## SUN VALLEY, IDAHO

For the annual All-Hands Offsite Meeting of Longitude Capital, a healthcare venture capital firm, London wanted to "meet in the middle" of the country. She chose Ketchum, ID — adjacent to Sun Valley — for last fall's gathering. The group of 30 was coming from the company's Connecticut and California offices.

"The mountain location was grounding," London says. "It provided a solid foundation for our group, and rather than being distracted by city lights and noise, we were able to clearly focus on each other. The fresh air renewed our spirits and the thrill of being in the great outdoors recharged our batteries. We enjoyed the magnificence of breathtaking scenery, wilderness at our finger-



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLISON LONDON

tips, and plenty of mountain air without sacrificing elegance and style."

While the nearby, 420-room Sun Valley Resort represents the largest hotel in the state, with 26,000 sf of meeting space, London chose the more intimate, 99-room Limelight Hotel Ketchum for her group, and she glowed over the success of the program.

"Our stay at the Limelight Hotel was the epitome of rustic luxury," London says. "The quality of lodging was superb. We loved that we could easily walk all over town, enjoy Sun Valley and Ketchum, and feel pampered at the Limelight." London extolled the hotel's gorgeous meeting rooms overlooking the mountains, state-of-the-art A/V equipment, and beautiful outdoor dining areas.

"It's just the spot to feel rugged, while really being spoiled rotten," she adds. "Senior sales manager Bert Witsil and his entire team went above and beyond — I was blown away by the stellar customer service. The guest rooms were heavenly and the staff was personal, professional and polished."

For meetings, Longitude Capital used the hotel's 2,070-sf Silver Creek Room, which was divided into two equal venues, but otherwise London focused much of the schedule around offsite activities.

"We organized a fantastic group hike to Titus Lake," London says. "I had Rob Caesar of Mountain Resort Services help us with transportation. The next day we spent three hours at the Hurtig Shooting Center where we were provided outstanding instruction before enjoying competitive clay/skeet shooting. Afterwards, we made our way back to Grumpy's for cold beer

Attendees at the annual All-Hands Offsite Meeting of Longitude Capital in Ketchum, ID enjoyed the activities near the Limelight Hotel Ketchum, especially an activity at Hurtig Shooting Center.

and burgers. We sat outside at picnic benches all aglow — and a bit dusty — taking pictures, sharing stories and truly enjoyed the camaraderie of connecting as friends on a wild adventure."

She adds, "We cleaned up for two beautiful dinners. At the Pioneer Saloon the cuisine was superb and the ambiance was not to be beat. Our group hit The Sawtooth Club for dinner the following night and it was excellent. Just a short walk from the Limelight was another quintessential Ketchum option, breakfast at The Kneadery. We also planned a casino night at Whiskey Jacques', and Aardvark Entertainment in Boise help set it all up — they brought card tables, chips, dealers; the whole thing. We had a blast."

While some remote mountain locations can present unanticipated obstacles, London says there were no unexpected challenges in Ketchum and Sun Valley.

"I did a lot of research on my own," London adds. "But the entire staff at the Limelight Hotel went out of their way to provide more color when I needed it. They moved heaven and earth to provide great comfort and ease."

## APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS, NORTH CAROLINA

While the mountain ranges of the east don't quite provide the dramatic backdrop of the Rockies or Sierras, the Appalachians offer plenty of soothing

vistas and mountain air. That was the setting that worked for a 100-person retreat by Nashville, TN-based Pinnacle Financial Partners.

“The Asheville, North Carolina mountains were a peaceful, aesthetically beautiful environment for the leaders of our firm,” says Kim Owen, executive assistant to Pinnacle’s CEO and president. “Disconnecting from our urban markets allowed our leaders to quiet and distance themselves from the hustle of the office to concentrate on new ideas and strategies for our firm’s growth. It was a casual atmosphere, where golf, cocktail hours, meals and a lobby fireplace sitting encouraged, fostered and built a deeper level of teamwork.”

The Omni Grove Park Inn was the location for the Leadership Team Retreat Owen arranged last fall. The 513-room hotel is just 2 miles from downtown Asheville, but the summit of Mount Mitchell — the highest point east of the Mississippi River — is just 32 miles away along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

“The Omni Grove Park Inn was a great fit for our meeting,” Owen says.

The Omni Grove Park Inn features 86,852 sf of meeting space, including the 17,760-sf Grand Ballroom.

“Our firm’s footprint includes Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, so it was a centralized meeting point. The Omni Grove Park Inn offered enough lodging with comfortable sized meeting rooms for all executives.”

The property features 86,852 sf of meeting space, including the 17,760-sf Grand Ballroom along with a wide

“What better way to break the monotony and routine than to throw in some high-altitude fun?”

**ALLISON LONDON**  
Executive Assistant and Special Event Planner  
Longitude Capital



variety of breakout rooms plus outdoor venues offering mountain views. The meeting facilities offer state-of-the-art technology with services backed by Encore Event Technologies.

“Pinnacle has a great relationship with the Omni brand,” Owen says. “We hold several meetings at the Omni Nashville Hotel throughout the year and all of their properties work together. They utilize our profile to know our style, likes, and desires before we ever get there. The different Omni locations even talk to each other to make sure they read their clients perfectly.”

Owen notes that the function spaces

were beautiful, but it’s worth paying attention to which venues have windows, especially when a Power Point presentation is planned. Owen also shared that the size of the property requires a lot of walking.

“The property is so beautiful and interesting, so you enjoy the walks,” Owen says. “But it’s important to give the attendees a heads up so they allow plenty of time before meeting functions start. Go on a site visit so you will know firsthand the exact location of your meeting and eating spaces, the rooms and their size. It will help to make sure no details and needs of your meeting are overlooked.”

Team-building events Owen scheduled included golf with a box lunch, and a scavenger hunt through the hotel. “They were very flexible in allowing us to use all public accessible areas of the property,” Owen adds, calling out two staff-members for special mention.

“Robert Sponder, the associate director of sales, is an outstanding partner. He always followed up to ensure the entire meeting experience was exactly what we wanted. He has a knack for the client and matching them with the perfect conference services manager to execute the event. He stayed in touch and kept communication open throughout the year, an invaluable resource.”

She adds, “And Natalie Broadwater, my conference service manager, is a front line expert. She made everything happen. On arrival, I was concerned that the overhead screens weren’t large enough, but she quickly called the A/V team, including Matt Casale, and they had the screen swapped out in no time. Also, we changed meeting rooms after day one of our event, but Natalie had all of our materials, along with tables moved and set in the new room before I even arrived early the next morning. She made me look like a superstar,” Owen says.

## COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

The Broadmoor, recipient of the Forbes Five-Star award for over 50 years, and the Award of Excellence from Corporate & Incentive Travel magazine for over 35 years, is an

unmatched destination for memorable events. The Broadmoor understands the unique needs and attention meeting planners require to create memorable and successful meeting and incentive travel experiences. The resort’s history of innovation combined with distinctive service culture and exceptional team-building opportunities has made the resort one on the country’s premier destinations.

Whether you are planning a board meeting for 10 attendees or a meeting or convention for 5,000, the resort can accommodate groups of all sizes in an ideal setting among the 185,000 sf of innovative event space and spectacular outdoor venues. In addition to being inspiring, with the resort’s technology-rich meeting spaces, planners will also find a professional staff of event planners, culinary and audio visual professionals with a support staff ready to elevate your group to its greatest potential. Planners should check out this outstanding one-of-a-kind resort with nearly 100 years of providing award-winning hospitality.

## VAIL, COLORADO

Of course, some mountain meetings are planned with snow in mind, as was the case for the Fitch Group, which held its annual CMBS Winter Roundtable in January 2019 at the Park Hyatt Beaver Creek Resort and Spa, just west of Vail.

The 190-room resort at the base of Beaver Creek Mountain offers a state-of-the-art conference center and more than 20,000 sf of meeting space, much of it with floor-to-ceiling windows, including the 8,631-sf Sawatch Hall. But most importantly: It’s a ski-in, ski-out resort offering challenging slopes right out the door, just a 30-minute drive from the Vail-Eagle airport.

“This event serves as a kickoff to the new year,” explains Gina DellaCava, CMP, global head of events for the Fitch Group. “So what better place to host in the winter but a mountain resort? Honestly, you cannot beat the Park Hyatt location. Literally walk out the door and within minutes you can be on the chair lift and hitting the slopes. That proximity allows guests more time to ski after our meetings conclude each day.”

The event drew 70 Fitch employees, while guests and family brought the total attendees to 162. There’s a full-



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARK HYATT BEAVER CREEK RESORT AND SPA

service 30,000-sf spa, outdoor pool and Jacuzzi. The hotel lays on the creature comforts in multiple ways, from complimentary s’mores kits made available for the outdoor fire pits to a ski valet situated just off the lobby.

“The Park Hyatt does a good job of anticipating the needs of a planner and a skier,” DellaCava says. “The ski valet is great — you don’t have to lug your gear around. And our program falls over football playoffs, so they helped us with TVs so we could see the games.”

But not all of the Fitch Group’s events are tied to the resort. “We host a family dinner night at Toscanini in Beaver Creek village,” DellaCava says. “It’s ideal because there is a beautiful outdoor ice skating rink located in front of the restaurant entrance, and families are invited to ice skate. The kids love it.”

DellaCava cautioned that winter snow levels can be unpredictable. “My experience from previous years where there wasn’t much snow is that you have to be adaptable. Maybe you offer a snowmobiling tour that’s half snowmobiling and have quads, still a lot of fun. But our attendees want lots of snow, and luckily this year we had plenty, which made for great ski conditions.”

Two other areas DellaCava advised staying abreast of in high-altitude settings: Heavy snow can slow down shipments, and shipping early is advisable; and altitude sickness happens, so stock up on oxygen cans.

“If you do a mountain program, definitely do après-ski. It’s great to have people come off the slopes to a warm, cozy room with fireplaces. We

Park Hyatt Beaver Creek Resort and Spa is an attractive venue because it’s a ski-in, ski-out resort in the winter, offering challenging slopes right out the door.

have plenty of food and drink for the adults, while the kids have a hot chocolate bar and s’mores kits to use at the outdoor fire pit.”

She adds, “We chose the Park Hyatt because it’s a great resort. But again — location, location, location!”

## BIG SKY RESORT, MONTANA

When planning a series of regional meetings for a major financial services company, Bible sought a family-friendly setting that allowed for meetings in the morning and afternoon and play in the evening. In all, 300 attended the program last summer at Big Sky Resort.

About one hour south of Bozeman, MT, Big Sky Resort is the second-largest ski resort in America by acreage. But in summer, golf, zip lines, archery, tennis, hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding are offered in and near the resort’s Mountain Village, and tram rides take guests to the summit of 11,166-foot Lone Peak.

The resort’s Yellowstone Conference Center avails 55,000 sf of meeting and function space and 9,000 sf of boardroom and banquet facilities, and a variety of lodging options can accommodate more than 2,000 guests. This summer, Big Sky is investing \$13 million in upgrades to facilities in the Mountain Village, including a modern food hall featuring sushi flown in fresh from both coasts, stone-fired pizza, a taqueria and ramen station.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OMNI GROVE PARK INN



PHOTO BY DAVE PECUNIES / COURTESY OF BIG SKY RESORT

“This company puts an emphasis on the importance of family and having a work-life balance,” Bible says. “The spaces at Big Sky were conducive to getting business and work done in the morning, while the afternoons were open for families to enjoy the resort and the surrounding areas. The rooms were very functional for families of all sizes and ages. The abundance of adjoining rooms and flexibility of the hotel staff made arrivals easy.”

There are several hotels on the property, with multiple venues at each hotel, and Bible recommends using a map to plan out the flow of events. “Also, if you are looking for some sleek contemporary resort, you won’t find it there — the bellmen are cowboys. However, you will find a traditional, rustic, classical mountain cabin environment and feel like you really belong in the beauty surrounding the resort.”

The resort presents the challenges typical of remote, mountain environments, such as loading up supplies in Bozeman, 50 miles away. Cell phone service can be spotty, so walkie-talkies can be useful. And depending on where guests are coming from, altitude sickness can be an issue.

“It may snow even in June,” Bible says. “It snowed the week before I arrived on site and I had forgotten to pack warm clothes for a summer trip. The biggest challenges we faced were weather-related, such as heating an outdoor pavilion, or trying to cool a room with the sun beaming directly

into it. The hotel moved quickly, and was able to make all the accommodations I ask for. They even dealt with the big personalities that made up my group — they took the bullets and let me play good cop, I can’t thank them enough for it.”

She adds, “Our group is pretty plane-Jane and doesn’t have many unique and custom needs, but Big Sky was more than flexible when we needed last-minute things or when events happened. Even though they were in the beginning of their summer season, and operations were not quite up to speed, they still reacted quickly with any help that I needed.”

She continues, “Jaime from the sales department and Rachel in event operations made my life incredibly easy. I travel over 300 days a year and they made sure to make me feel welcome and that Big Sky could be my home for the next two weeks. Both of them went above and beyond to take care of me.”

### HOCKING HILLS, OHIO

Some challenges of a true mountain environment can be overcome at the gentler setting of Hocking Hills, a state park about 60 miles southeast of Columbus, OH. While known for its unusual topography of cliffs, gorges and waterfalls, the elevation doesn’t exceed 1,200 feet above sea level, alleviating typical mountain issues of extreme weather and altitude.

“We love having access to the beautiful Hocking Hills State Park right

In addition to all of the activities available at mountain resorts and hotels, there is always golf. The courses offer stunning views and challenging holes.

in our backyard,” explains Deborah Dreifort, MBA, finance and operations manager at Snider, Fuller and Stroh, an Athens, OH-based provider of business insurance, employee benefits and retirement plans. “It’s nice that we can largely unplug from the daily grind of the office and take time to focus on business building activities.”

For the annual Company Retreat this April, Dreifort used the family owned Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls — the same location Snider, Fuller and Stroh has selected for 20 years. Located just outside the state park, the inn has 29 rooms, plus four standalone lodges in the surrounding area. The inn features a 1840s log cabin called the Gathering Place, which offers 2,500 sf of meeting space for smaller corporate retreats and workshops, along with a 450-sf Fireside Lounge and various outdoor areas suitable for events.

“The atmosphere is high-end with a rustic charm,” Dreifort says. “There is easy access to the Cedar Falls hiking site so we can get outside and have a beautiful walk in the woods when we’re done meeting for the day.”

The inn can accommodate all meals, and Dreifort says several people in her group have dietary restrictions. “The inn always works with us on that and they have been very flexible with us every year providing customized brown bag lunches for us in our meeting space so that we can have a working lunch. We have fabulous dinners and breakfasts in the dining room.”

She adds, “The nearest town with conveniences is 20 minutes away by car on a hilly and curvy country drive. We definitely like that for our company retreats, but I can see where it would be challenging to someone who is accustomed to having a Walgreens a few easy minutes away. We love the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls for its well-appointed meeting space, easy-to-work-with and professional staff, beautiful woodsy setting, comfortable lodging, delicious food and drink and affordability.” **IFMM**



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Live entertainment featuring well-known acts is one of the best ways to create an event that wows attendees.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLISON SARGENT EVENTS

# Creating Wow Events

## How to Create That Something Special at a Meeting

BY KEITH LORIA

Every meeting is special, but sometimes, you just have to “wow” an audience, especially when you’re trying to set yourself apart in the insurance and financial sectors.

There are occasions when planners have to help a company or organization go above and beyond and create a meeting that will dazzle, dazzle and amaze participants. In these instances, a typical or even very good event, isn’t enough.

Allison Sargent, the founder and CEO of

Allison Sargent Events, based in Montclair, NJ, says the types of events that require a “wow” factor include the launch of a new line or concept, especially when expectations for this endeavor are extraordinary.

“We always guide and encourage our clients to present themselves at their very best — with unique and different ideas,” Sargent says. “There’s no replacement for making the best first impression, as it often is what can help put a brand or product on the map.”

Sargent adds that one of the keys to a “wow” event is leaving guests with a lasting impression, one that they will remember long after the meeting ends.

“Sometimes this is just as simple as looking at the elements of the event that are existing and changing up everyday elements to be unexpected,” she says. “Many times, this can be done by changing up the way the room is laid out, the way food is displayed, incorporating unexpected elements or customizing elements that aren’t typically customized.”

She noted an example of a meeting her company hosted that substituted standard place cards with “flight attendants” who provided each guest with a “boarding pass” that indicated where they were seated.

### FROM START TO FINISH

Vivian Perez, CMP, marketing director for La Bonne Cuisine Catering and Events, says guest participation is a sure ticket to a fun and memorable meeting — especially for those in the insurance and financial fields.

“Thinking about attendee participation in every aspect of an event is important,” she says. “In an age where we are competing with screens at their disposal all the time, the best way to hold their attention and keep them engaged is to give attendees the opportunity to be active participants. Also, don’t look at an event as something that starts on the live event date. The event actually starts with the invitation, and there are even opportunities at that point to ‘wow’ and get guests excited about the meeting or event.”

Sargent noted several factors that can add that extra something to all aspects of a meeting, including creating a first impression with a unique invitation box.

She also noted the importance of lighting.

“Lighting is always underestimated, but has a huge impact,” she says. “Now there is light mapping which can project video and branding.”

She also suggested a menu created with calligraphy by hand instead of the typical place card.



BRETT MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPHY

In addition to meeting dietary needs, how the food and beverage is displayed can contribute to the “wow” factor for attendees.

### WINE AND DINE YOUR GUESTS

One of the most important elements of an amazing meeting is food, not just in terms of quality but presentation as well. The foodie and organic crazes has made a lot of people more knowledgeable about food and more particular about what they eat.

“More than ever, food and beverage at an event has become experiential and where presentation is critical,” Sargent says. “A huge percentage of our guests are photographing every

“If the food and beverage are too elaborate then this could result in investors questioning where their assets are being allocated. It is important to find a good balance and know your audience.”

**SAMANTHA FLOWERS**  
Meeting and Event Manager  
Special D Events



element of an event that they attend — especially food and beverage — creating a great opportunity for our clients to market or brand an event using food displays, branded food or parting gifts that are an edible. The same is true for bars — we believe in custom created bars, service in specialty glassware and signage, down to the dress of the server.”

Samantha Flowers, meeting and event manager for Special D Events, based in Detroit, MI, says food and beverages are vital, not only because

they can impress attendees, but because they also serve an important practical purpose.

“If the meeting is held during lunchtime and there are not enough offerings, the attendees may be distracted by hunger and, therefore, not focusing on your content,” she says. “Or, if the food and beverage are too elaborate then this could result in investors questioning where their assets are being allocated. It is important to find a good balance and know your audience.” She also says food offers an opportunity to

impress participants by catering to their needs and requests.

“Asking for your attendees’ dietary restrictions during registration and ensuring that vegetarians, those with celiac disease, and kosher attendees have menu items to select from is very important,” Flowers says. “Often these items are not included and can leave attendees walking away disappointed or leaving early.”

Perez noted a meeting La Bonne planned for Google administrative assistance that showcased chocolate



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLISON SARGENT

in all dishes, even the savory ones.

“We had two interactive stations — make your own terrarium and paint a cookie,” she says. “The goal of the event was for their administrative assistants to bond outside of work, since it’s such a big company and administrative assistants may not get to know each other otherwise, and yet they can help each other so much.”

### DON'T GO TOO FAR

Planning a “wow” meeting means creating the right situation for each client. Planners warn that there is a risk is going too far or over the top.

“This is where an experienced event professional comes in to help guide and make those determinations,” Sargent says. “Always keep in mind the purpose

of the event and simply use ‘wow’ factors to elevate your purpose and work in your favor. You have to know the right mix of great elements, making sure that the first and last impressions are exceptional. If the brand message is confused with too many activities or musical elements, or the venue is too broad with too much going on, the attendees will likely feel overwhelmed and thus won’t leave with a clear marketing impression.”

Flowers warns against creating a scene that is so amazing that it distracts from the occasion’s purpose.

“It is important to keep the goal of the meeting, the company’s brand and the content in mind,” she says. “This can get lost when determining a ‘wow’ factor. Starting with a focus on the goals,

Planners should always look for new and creative ways to wow attendees, but be sure the ideas don’t bust the budget.

brand and key messages will allow the planner to build on these items and create an amazing experience. Enhancements can be added as the planning continues, and this sequence will ensure they are aligned with the event.”

### THE COST FACTOR

Putting on a “wow” meeting sounds expensive, but with a little planning and smart thinking, you can find ways to add amazing elements to events without busting the budget.

“It often does have an impact and helps, but it doesn’t have to break the budget,” Sargent says of money and cost. “Of course, a fireworks display, or celebrity appearance can be costly. Look internally for relationships to reach celebrity or special guests that might be willing to be a part of the event with a discounted cost. However — it is true that you get what you pay for.”

Brent Turner, senior vice president, business solutions for Opus, says that across all events and meetings types, there is always an opportunity to deliver “wow” moments.

“To make an event score high with attendees, we have found that we only need a few well-planned and designed ‘wow’ moments,” Turner says. “It is usually easy to create a list of potential ‘wows’ — great bands, interesting food, amazing keynoters, unique activations. The challenge is in selecting, planning and designing the ‘wows’ that have the most chance at succeeding.”

Perez says that while budget is going to have an effect on a meeting’s “wow” quotient, creativity can go a long way.

“The key is understanding who your guests are and what their needs are in order to cater to them,” she says.

Planners should seek a balance with entertainment and keep in mind the goal of the event. Some acts may be too loud if networking is the goal, or not energetic enough for a company anniversary.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLISON SARGENT EVENTS

“Another thing that may seem obvious but sometimes gets lost when planning events is keeping in mind what is the end result we want? What is the purpose of anything we do? Sometimes we want to ‘wow’ for the sake of ‘wow,’ but is it adding anything to the event’s goal?”

She suggests affordable steps such as including a surprise or a fun, interactive food station. “One tip is to ask your venue what events are happening before and after yours and see if you can connect with the other planner to see if you can share costs of things like decor and A/V,” Perez says. “Another would be instead of having a sit-down lunch or dinner, have food action stations where guests can have some fun with the food, as well as having the opportunity to keep conversations going.”

### ENTER THE MOMENT MATRIX

Turner says that in creating “wow” meetings for those in the financial industry, a company might use a “moment matrix,” the first part of which is built around moments that will have impact and also create lasting memories.

“As seen in studies of the Disney World effect and in the best-selling book “The Power of Moments,” we have identified five core memory-driving moments within an experience: arrivals, transitions, elevation, script flipping, and departures,” Turner says.

The second part of this matrix is built around the three core reasons that people attend events — content, networking, and experience.

“Inside this matrix, the full event teams can workshop new ideas of all shapes and sizes,” Turner says. “Should we give attendees something personalized at registration? Do we change the general session to an unexpected format? What can we do during a break that drives networking differently? What speakers will have unique scoops of perception that will blow the minds of our audience?”

### ON WITH THE SHOW

One highly recommended step that can help create an outstanding meeting is some sort of show or performance.



JOE LOVETT / CRAMER

A unique networking experience — such as chairs hanging from the ceiling — is sure to score big with attendees.

“We love live entertainment,” Sargent says. “It completely engages the guest from the moment they arrive and makes a great first impression. It helps to create the right atmosphere and elevates the quality of the event. There are so many directions you can go with now for live entertainment, which is determined off the type of event and the atmosphere you want to create — ranging from a large dance band to a solo electric violinist or pianist.”

Flowers says to make sure the entertainment fits the occasion.

Activities such as sporting events or local attractions can also be a form of entertainment and provide unique experiences for your participants.”

Turner cautions that entertainment can bring people together, or drive them apart.

“The band your CEO likes? Half of the room may not like,” he says. “The dance troop that amps-up a crowd may be seen as a wasted expense for some people.”

He adds that the best entertainment fits into the moments matrix.

“A beautiful string quartet playing music during registration makes the lines more soothing,” Turner says. “A magician or powerful stage performer that brings the audience

into their act makes the general session unexpected. A band that plays known songs and has a great story makes attendees stay and connect, even when the songs are not to their preference.”

### GET EVERYONE INVOLVED

Entertainment doesn’t have to mean performers sharing their talents before an audience, some organizations will want their attendees to participate in an activity together.

“There are two sides to the ‘wow’

“Sometimes we want to ‘wow’ for the sake of ‘wow,’ but is it adding anything to the event’s goal?”

**VIVIAN PEREZ, CMP**

Marketing Director  
La Bonne Cuisine Catering and Events





BRETT MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPHY

coin,” says John Smyth, director of sales for Puzzle Break. “First, participants must have fun. No brainer, right? In practice, this is only half the battle. The crucial other side of the coin is to ensure participant buy-in. Absent this, the most fun/wonderful/compelling/fantastic event in the world will fail to ‘wow.’”

Puzzle Break, which bills itself as America’s first escape room company, can bring portable team-building activities to events that can be played by groups as small as 10 and as large as 2,000.

Smyth says the company has worked with meeting planners and venues on corporate events that want team building, or an activity that can offer a respite or serve as an ice breaker that helps people engage with each other.

He adds that the company can create experiences that are tailored to specific companies or organizations.

“Puzzle Break has a wealth of experience and design resources to craft exactly what works best for any particular company or event,” Smyth says. “Interestingly, the most requested custom component is the competitive element of the experience. Some companies want a cutthroat competitive experience that pits teams against each other. Others want a completely relaxed experience that allows each team to enjoy the activity at their desired pace. If our offerings weren’t flexible, Puzzle Break would have a very hard time satisfying the wide variety of events we service.”

He adds that Puzzle Break provides a vital component to amazing meetings. “This is impossible to overstate,” he says. “There is no such thing as an amazing event without an amazing activity.”

#### A CASE STUDY

Flowers shared her experience planning a summit for five consecutive years that received praise from participants.

Success started with the determination of the event’s goals, anticipating attendee count and meeting space, and allowing for proper research and selection of a site location.

“This ensured I had a venue that fit the overall needs prior to being locked into a contract,” Flowers says. “Also, I changed the venue every year to expose the attendees to different areas in the community. I even transformed raw spaces for the event, and this was always a ‘wow’ factor to attendees.”

The meeting used multiple rooms for change in environment between sessions, which created a seamless experience for guests, who didn’t see setup, tear-down, or backstage preparation.

“The general session was often held in an auditorium or theater-style seating,” Flowers says. “The networking session would be in a more open space, allowing for more room and conversation.”

Meanwhile, the networking space was the place for food, beverages and exhibitors, who were mixed in with the participants not in booths, signage and décor.

Samantha Flowers, Meeting and Event Manager, Special D Events, advises fellow planners to not be afraid to ask for what they want. Here, she had the tables and chairs removed from a bar to create a better atmosphere for networking.

“Overhead was a custom chalet, like the one the sponsors in attendance would be utilizing at an upcoming sporting event,” Flowers said. “Bringing items to life is another way to create an amazing experience.”

These events also often included activities, with Flowers citing the most successful one as an electric kart race, with vehicles capable of reaching 40 mph without any fumes and minimal noise. It has helped that the facility was geared toward corporate events and was the perfect setting for safe racing.

Branding was an important part of this series of events, including a vehicle display that fit the company’s brand at valet.

“This event spread the company’s brand from the presentation to a final touch point at valet,” Flowers says. “The networking reception included continued learning within the décor. The company’s goals and the participant experience were tied together and considered with every detail — creating a ‘wow’ factor within the event itself.”

And surely when people left that event, they all thought to themselves, “Wow!”

I&MM



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## Arizona Offers Hundreds of Days of Sunshine, Attractive Venues and a Surplus of Activities

**A**s the warmth of summer settles over most of the U.S., one state is looking forward to the milder months of fall, winter and spring, when its outdoor environments are at their peak: Arizona.

An enviable blend of desert and mountain settings, Mexican and Native American cultures, and iconic sights ranging from the Grand Canyon to Monument Valley, Arizona offers a surprisingly exotic backdrop for memorable meetings.

With more than 40,000 hotel rooms combined, the Phoenix-Scottsdale metropolitan area represents the vast majority of the state's meeting options. And for BridgeForce Financial Group, a program last October in Scottsdale met the goals cited by Shannon Burnham, vice president and corporate planner for the company.

"One big plus for us was the weather," Burnham explains. "Arizona is known for its sunny, warm days, which allowed us to arrange outside events without hesitation. Also there are direct flights to Phoenix Sky Harbor (PHX), so it was very convenient as far as ease of travel was concerned. And it was also a destination that many of our qualifiers had yet to explore, making Scottsdale a perfect location to relax, unwind and enjoy."

For her 120-attendee event, Burnham selected the Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia, a 293-room property that effectively utilizes the Sonoran Desert as its backdrop.

"Once you arrive in Phoenix the Omni Scottsdale Resort is only a short, 20-minute transfer," Burnham says. "We have had a relationship with the Omni chain for years and have taken conferences to their San Antonio, Nashville and Toronto properties. Our goal is always to immerse our guests in the energy of the destination and for them to walk away with an authentic experience. Omni does a great job of exhibiting their local culture and of combining a boutique hotel experience with all the amenities of a big resort. We also love the style and sprawling footprint of this hotel, and you can't beat the views of Camelback Mountain."

The atmosphere of this desert oasis is inspired by Spain's Andalusia region, reminiscent of a picturesque village with arching entryways, tranquil fountains and floral walkways. The resort features a 24-hour fitness center, three swimming pools and the Moroccan-inspired Joya Spa, while the six culinary options are influenced by the flavors of Spain and Mexico. The Omni

# A SOUTHWESTERN OASIS

BY DAVID SWANSON

COURTESY PHOTO

Scottsdale Resort features 27,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including the 9,216-sf Alhambra Ballroom, plus 75,000 sf of outdoor space and several unique private dining spaces.

“Every day during our event I received emails from our conference or sales manager asking how things were going and if they could do anything for our group,” Burnham says. “As planners know, there are always last-minute changes or additions and they were quick to help with these when necessary. The general vibe was very friendly and accommodating and everyone was willing to help make your event a great one.”



Above, two attendees play bocce at Omni Scottsdale Resort & Spa at Montelucia, which features 27,000 sf of flexible meeting space and 75,000 sf of outdoor space.

“Another factor that is very important to us is event spaces on property,” Burnham adds. “We loved their options for our cocktail party and ended up on the Valencia Lawn, with beautiful views of the mountains. It was also a treat to enjoy breakfast and lunch outdoors in their courtyard. Whenever we can escape the generality of a meeting or boardroom we jump at the chance. Many of our guests told us they wanted to share the experience with their own

friends and family and would be back to the Omni Scottsdale Resort.”

But the destination beyond the resort was also important for Burnham.

“We give our guests a lot of free time, so we needed a destination that had a variety of activities to offer,” Burnham says. “For the outdoor types, and to create picturesque memories, we had Camelback Mountain within walking distance for hiking. And there were deserts to explore where you could ride ATVs or do jeep tours. For the urban types, we had luxury shopping at Fashion Square or Kierland Commons, and there was row upon row of

different restaurants, breweries and bars in Old Town.”

Burnham adds: “We broke out into smaller groups for dine-arounds one evening and hit up some of the best restaurants Scottsdale has to offer. We had several groups go to elements, another group at Mastro’s Ocean Club restaurant in the Kierland Commons, and one last group at El Chorro. We try to incorporate a happy hour event within our program and usually hold it at one of the local ‘dive’ bars. We chose Gili-gin’s Bar for this event. We described it in our itinerary as a combination of a dive bar, carnival and frat house. If you want something completely out of the box, but at the same time a great networking opportunity, I highly recom-

mend them. The service and food were great, the atmosphere was fun, and the price was even better.”

Burnham adds, “Our final night event was at Desert Foothills, a unique event venue. They have large fire pits for roasting marshmallows, picnic tables with red-checked tablecloths for an old-fashioned barbecue, Western-style games and a band shell for entertainment. They also have a beautiful barn facility in case of inclement weather. We hired a live karaoke band called Instant Classics and our guests got to sing and dance underneath the stars. Guests raved over the ribs, one of their specialties. Their coordinator was extremely organized and updated me constantly on changing weather patterns and provided last-minute alternatives and solutions.”

Burnham says the only challenge for her group was transportation. “Scottsdale is very sprawling, so if you are going off property for free time or a planned event then transportation is required. Luckily, we hired Southwest Conference Planners to assist us with the busing of our guests, and Ollie the Trolley for a customized hop-on/hop-off loop around the city.”

While the Phoenix-Scottsdale metropolitan area is home to more than two-thirds of Arizona’s population and holds the bulk of the state’s meeting space, don’t overlook outlying cities for something different, especially for small and mid-sized events.

Tucson’s tourism picture lagged the rest of Arizona’s following the 2008-09 recession, but a resurgence of interest has bubbled over the last couple years. The opening of a 136-room Marriott-operated AC Hotel Tucson Downtown last fall — the first new hotel downtown since the 1970s — has helped lure locals and visitors into the city, as has a growing menu of restaurants and bars. The Arizona Daily Star reports that five additional hotel projects are in the pipeline for downtown, including a sorely needed, \$38 million, 170-room DoubleTree by Hilton adjacent to the Tucson Convention Center. Following its May 2019 groundbreaking, the six-

story hotel will have 4,000 sf of meeting space and is expected to open by the end of 2020.

Existing properties are also getting fresh attention. The DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Tucson – Reid Park recently started a \$16 million renovation that will enhance the hotel’s common areas, including the lobby, restaurants, meeting facilities and courtyards. The hotel offers more than 22,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space, and a new dining venue, Crystals, has been added. Improvements to the expansive pool area and landscaping are underway and a remodel of the 287 guest rooms is planned.

Meanwhile, the Hilton Tucson East, located in midtown Tucson, celebrated its 30th anniversary with an \$8 million makeover unveiled last year. The renovation covered all 232 guest rooms, and upgrades to meeting rooms and the 4,743-sf Rosewood Ballroom and swimming pool area, plus a new restaurant and bar.

The 575-room JW Marriott Tucson Starr Pass Resort & Spa is the destination’s largest hotel, located in the saguaro cactus-dotted foothills overlooking the city, yet just 6 miles from downtown. The property has 80,768 sf of event space, including a 19,836-sf ballroom, while other features include 27 holes of championship golf at the Starr Pass Golf Club and a 20,000-sf full-service spa, which completed a refreshment last September.

At Canyon Ranch in Tucson, a full renovation of all 166 guest rooms will be completed at this end of this year, highlighting a clean aesthetic, personal patios and high-end amenities throughout, to foster a modern atmosphere of well-being. Cuisine is also being elevated with the arrival of new executive chef Russell Michel, a leader in the farm-to-table movement. The famed resort and spa can accommodate groups of up to 80, with total meeting space of 10,590 sf.

Tanque Verde Ranch, one of two dude ranches on the outskirts of Tucson, is currently building a new event venue, The Barn. Set in the rolling foothills next to Saguaro National Park, The Barn will offer stunning views



PHOTO COURTESY OF VISIT TUCSON

and sunsets when it opens in November this year. The purpose-built facility, which includes a full kitchen, will have an indoor dining room measuring almost 8,000 sf to accommodate up to 350 seated guests at a time, plus a lawn area measuring 4,000 sf. Tanque Verde is located just 18 miles east of downtown Tucson.

One of the key advantages in using an Arizona dude ranch for events is that most of these outfits operate year-round, in contrast to dude ranches to the north, which are usually summer-only. And a winter escape is what

Colossal Cave Mountain Park outside Tucson is a 2,400-acre park featuring tours of Colossal Cave. Attendees can participate in Western trail rides, camping, picnicking and more.

and is not a huge metropolitan area, but yet has many area attractions. We have used White Stallion Ranch for our gatherings, and it provides many, varied activities which are enjoyed by all ages.”

Built in the early 1900s as a cattle ranch, the property was converted in 1945, when more than 100 dude ranches were in the Tucson area. Starting in this period, dozens of movies and TV shows were filmed at the ranch, most notably “Winchester ’73” starring Jimmy Stewart. In 1965 the ranch changed hands and grew from 200 acres to its present-day 3,000 acres, and it houses one of Arizona’s largest private herd of horses, along with a herd of cattle.

The ranch is 18 miles northwest of downtown Tucson, and the property abuts the northern edge of Saguaro National Park. Accommodations include 43 rooms and a five-bedroom hacienda, wrapped by lovingly tended desert gardens. Rooms are modern and comfortable and feature patios with fireplaces, there’s an indoor-outdoor dining area, with themed meals created daily.

“White Stallion Ranch has a perfectly sized, separate meeting center within the overall complex, yet apart

“Arizona is known for its sunny, warm days, which allowed us to arrange outside events without hesitation.”

**SHANNON BURNHAM**

Vice President and Corporate Planner  
BridgeForce Financial Group



from other guest areas,” True says. “It’s set up with needed technology, including good internet connectivity. All of the guest rooms and dining facilities are immediately accessible. The western décor and outdoors environment adds significantly to the overall enjoyment.”

Team-building activities are central to the experience at White Stallion Ranch.

“A great enhancement for attendees is the great and varied activities,” True adds. “These range from the usual horseback riding, hiking and swimming pool to recently added options of e-bike rides, pistol/rifle target shooting and rock climbing.” All are available on an a la carte basis or as part of the ranch’s inclusive Adventure Package, and evening entertainment and a weekly rodeo are also offered.

“The White Stallion Ranch is not a typical hotel,” True says. “It has a very down-home feel and the family members who work and live right there make it a wonderful, individualized experience, no matter the age of the guest.”

But it is the Phoenix-Scottsdale area where most of the meeting and development news is found, and last year Marriott International acquired the area’s largest hotel, the 1,000-room Sheraton Grand Phoenix, from the city for \$255 million. A significant renovation of the 10-year-old hotel began in June this year, and will include updates to the 77,000-sf of meeting space. The hotel remains open during the work, expected to be completed by early 2020. The Arizona Republic reports that Sheraton execu-



PHOTO BY AN PHAM / 2019 HILTON

tives hope the Sheraton Grand Phoenix will be the chain’s “jewel box” to display the concepts they’ve envisioned for the entire brand.

In Scottsdale, The Phoenician, a Luxury Collection Resort, Scottsdale, completed its most extensive renovation since the 643-room hotel opened in 1988. A redesign of guest rooms and common areas was completed in 2016-2017, while last year saw the opening of a new athletic club and three-story spa facility. The Phoenician Golf Club was also redesigned and re-routed from 27 to 18 holes, a 10-month project completed last November. The Phoenician boasts approximately 160,000 sf of signature indoor and outdoor space including the Grand Ballroom, which hosts up to 2,500 for gala celebrations.

At El Conquistador Tucson, A Hilton Resort, attendees can watch the Native American Evening Ritual.

Last year, the JW Marriott Scottsdale Camelback Inn Resort & Spa unveiled its new, 15,000-sf Paradise Ballroom, along with another 20,000 sf of outdoor and pre-function space. The additions bring the resort’s total meeting and event space to 95,000 sf. Floor-to-ceiling windows radiate natural light and provide views of Mummy Mountain, and the ballroom is the first in Marriott’s portfolio to display artwork from the personal collection of J. Willard “Bill” Marriott Jr.

The Arizona Biltmore, A Waldorf Astoria Resort, is in the midst of celebrating its 90th anniversary. The historic resort, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, has been a time-honored destination for presidents, dignitaries and celebrities alike, as well as meetings and conferences. The resort has more than 200,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space, including the 24,576-sf Frank Lloyd Wright Ballroom, one of Arizona’s largest. **I&FMM**



PHOTO COURTESY OF VISIT TUCSON

The annual Fiesta de los Vaqueros rodeo, held in Tucson since 1925, was created to draw more visitors to Tucson during the mid-winter months.

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**ESPARZA**

BENCHMARK, a global hospitality company, has named **Donna Esparza** director of sales and marketing for Lake Arrowhead Resort and Spa in Lake Arrowhead, CA. Esparza was previously the remarkably successful director of sales and marketing for Marriott Hotels – Riverside, CA.

The Brown Palace Hotel and Spa, Autograph Collection, welcomes **Justin Budyak** as complex director of sales and marketing of the iconic landmark and the adjacent Holiday Inn Express Denver Downtown, part of The Brown Palace hotel complex. In this role, Budyak will be responsible for generating maximum revenue through developing and executing marketing strategies that will drive sales.



**ANDERSON**

Visit Seattle announced the promotion of **Troy Anderson** to director of sales. In his new role Anderson will be responsible for providing day-to-day leadership of the Seattle-based contingent of Visit Seattle's convention sales team, which also includes several regionally based sellers. This national team sells the Washington State Convention Center and Seattle hotels with the best-fit business to maximize opportunities for the hospitality community and destination.

The Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau has announced **Aaron Jones** as new executive vice president. Jones joins the GBCVB after having served four years as CEO of MetroLacrosse, the largest urban lacrosse and youth development program in the United States. His primary responsibilities will include oversight of day-to-day operations, operating budgets, financial practices and revenue generation.



**GREEN**

The Wigwam appointed **J. Green** to vice president of sales and marketing. With two decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Green will lead a team of 25 in the planning and implementation of initiatives to boost revenues while promoting the AAA Four-Diamond services available at the storied resort.



**MANNING**

The Watergate Hotel named **Ruben G. Rodriguez**, vice president of sales. In this position, Rodriguez will oversee the implementation of annual sales plans and lead the sales team in targeting new business and revenue streams. Rodriguez's career in the luxury hospitality industry spans over 20 years, where most recently he served as area director of sales and marketing for Meliá Hotels International in Miami.

InterContinental Hotels Group welcomed **Eric Manning**, director of sales and marketing for InterContinental San Diego, where he will lead group sales efforts for the hotel's 400 rooms and 95,000 sf of meeting and event space. With over 15 years of professional experience, he brings strong sales leadership and extensive local market expertise to the InterContinental San Diego team, with a primary focus on driving top-line revenues and building client loyalty.



**OSBERG**

The Broadmoor announced the promotions of three rising stars to its Sales Team: **Caleb Rice**, director of national accounts, Incentive/Insurance; **Christina Osberg**, director of national sales, West Region and **Ashley Kloster**, sales manager – Executive Meetings and Golf. I&FMM



**BUDYAK**



**JONES**



**RODRIGUEZ**



**RICE**



**KLOSTER**

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WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

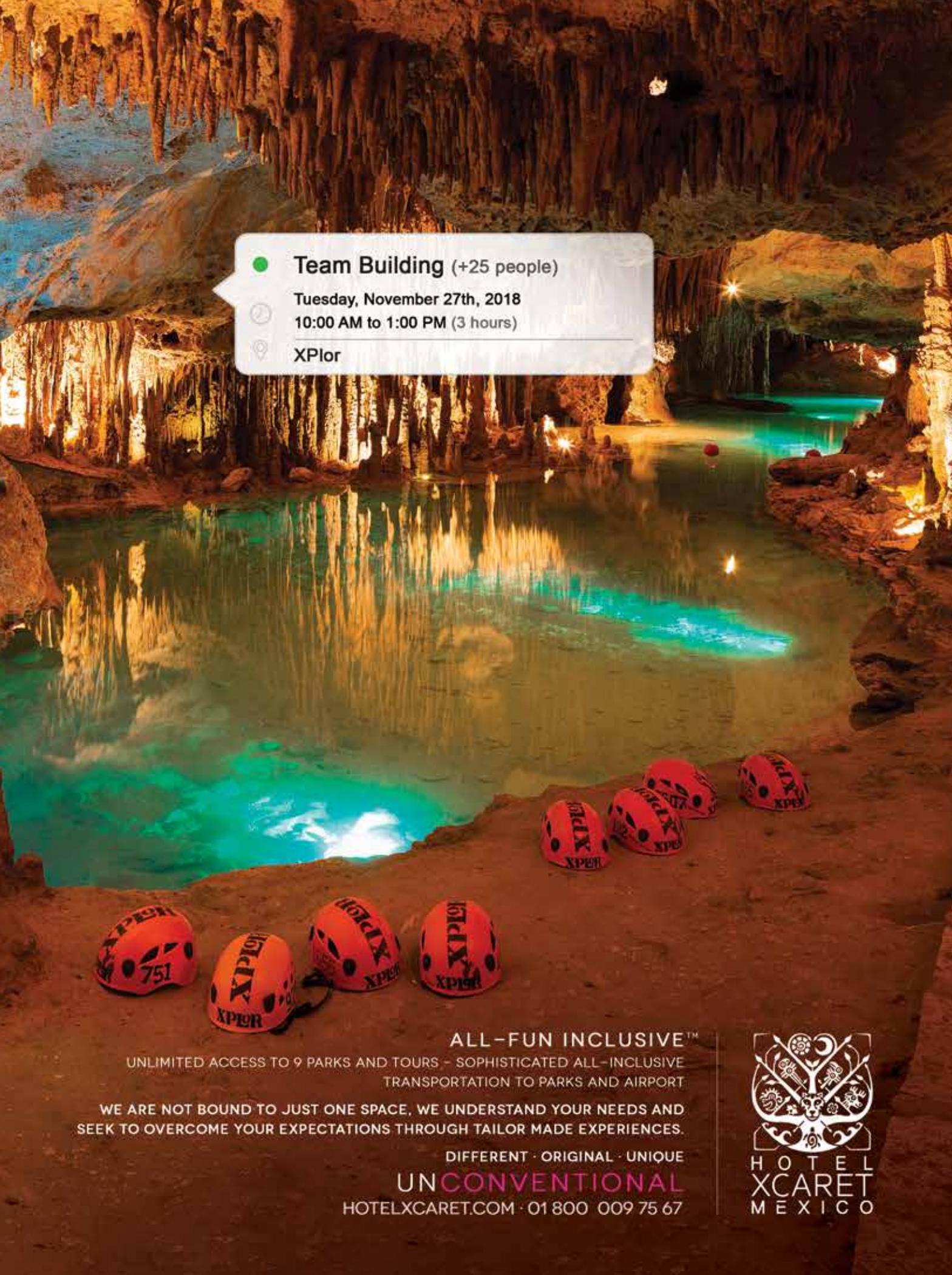


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10:00 AM to 1:00 PM (3 hours)

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