Are You Onboard?
Catching a New Wave of Excitement for Cruise Meetings and Incentives

DMOs and Digital Team Up to Enhance the Destination and Build Attendance

F&B Grows Up Enriching the Meeting Experience With Taste and Style

Arizona  PAGE 26  Florida  PAGE 30  Louisiana  PAGE 42

The Celebrity Solstice, flagship of the Solstice fleet, cruises the Virgin Islands.
FEATURES
18 DMOs and Digital
Team Up to Enhance
the Destination and
Build Attendance
By John Buchanan

22 F&B Grows Up
Enriching the Meeting
Experience With
Taste and Style
By John Buchanan

26 Arizona
Meeting Success in the
Spectacular Southwest
By Karen Brost

30 Viva Florida!
Meet in the Sunshine
State as It Celebrates
Its 500th Birthday
By Karen Brost

42 Louisiana
A Magical Mix of Culture,
Cuisine, Music and More
Keeps Groups Coming
Back Year After Year
By Derek Reveron

DePARTMeNTS
4 Publisher’s Message
By Harvey Grotsky
6 News & Notes
6 Events Calendar
8 Meeting Values
10 Snapshots
10 Perspective
It’s Never Too Late to Set
Goals to Increase Your
Professional Development
By Jeff Hurt

PEOPLE on the MOVE
50 Reader Services

TABLE OF CONTENTS
www.TheMeetingMagazines.com
VOLUME 31 NO. 2 FEBRUARY 2013

COVeR STOry
Are You Onboard?
Catching a New Wave
of Excitement for Cruise
Meetings and Incentives
By Timothy Herrick

The flagship of Celebrity Cruises’ stylish Solstice
Class fleet is the 2,850-guest Celebrity Solstice.
Build It and They Will Come

The phrase “build it and they will come,” spawned from the popular 1989 baseball movie “Field of Dreams,” is an apt way to describe how the meetings industry and the cruise lines have come together in recent times. Previously, planners selected a cruise mostly for an occasional incentive program because onboard meeting facilities and services were few and far between. But that has changed. Cruise lines listened to planners, responded by adding meeting space, new onboard amenities and services, innovative audio-visual, and business is certainly improving. Moreover, many cruise companies are actively seeking meetings business and are building new ships that fit the unique requirements of meetings.

Christine Duffy, president of Cruise Lines International Association, spearheaded these efforts by creating a Meeting, Event and Incentive Taskforce to increase the awareness of the value of cruising. “Planners are now realizing that a cruise can support their new meetings needs,” said Duffy. “The ships today have the meeting space, the technology, the Wi-Fi. People were assuming there was not enough variety, but the fact is that most corporate groups contain different demographics, and there are activities for people who are more sedentary to full-blown spas, fitness centers, rock climbing and a range of options.”

The cruise companies, which have always been at the top of their game for hosting pure incentives, can now easily handle the newer hybrid events that merge an incentive program with meeting components, too. Jo Kling, president of cruise specialist Landry & Kling and CEO of the cruise meeting resource Seasite.com, says, “Cruising is becoming part of the rotation of more planners for incentive travel and a meeting program. They are looking for something a little different. Programs can be customized to meet different needs of the planner, for whatever size group.”

And Shari Wallack, president of Plantation, FL-based Buy the Sea, adds, “Incentive travel by ship has grown. The ‘build it they will come’ adage applies. Years ago, the corporate decision-makers were not experienced cruisers. Today’s CEO is young, well-traveled and likely cruise-savvy. This decision-maker’s understanding of the industry is vastly different, and he or she is more open to a new experience.”

Read more about this positive win-win story in our insightful cover story “Are You Onboard?” on page 12.
Baha Mar Casino Hotel to Open in December 2014

NASSAU, BAHAMAS — Baha Mar, the mega-resort development on the Cable Beach area of Nassau, on New Providence Island in The islands of the Bahamas, is scheduled to debut its 1,000-room casino hotel in December 2014, according to Robert “Sandy” Sands, Baha Mar’s senior vice president, administration and external affairs, as reported in Travel Weekly. Three other properties are expected to open by March 2015. “We are one third done now. We have 23 months to go before we welcome our first guest, and we will be ready,” Sands said. The brand for the casino hotel will be announced within the next six months; the other new hotels are the 200-room Rosewood at Baha Mar, the highest-end resort in the complex; the 300-room Mondrian at Baha Mar, the highest-end resort in the complex; the 300-room Mondrian at Baha Mar, the highest-end resort in the complex; and the 700-room Grand Hyatt at Baha Mar, a convention hotel. A 550-room Wyndham and 700-room Sheraton are already operating in the Cable Beach area of Nassau, on New Providence Island in The islands of the Bahamas.

Hyatt Regency Chicago to Debut Renovation in April

CHICAGO, IL — The 2,019-room Hyatt Regency Chicago, the city’s largest hotel, is set to unveil a $168 million property-wide renovation. From a chic new lobby, revamped guest rooms, meeting spaces and an array of exciting new and re-concepted dining experiences, the hotel will officially complete the process in April 2013. Phase three, set to conclude the project, completely renovated the East Tower Lobby, as well as all of the meeting and event space, and dining outlets. The property boasts more than 228,000 sf of expansive newly renovated, modern venues including four ballrooms, 63 meeting rooms and the 70,000 sf Riverside Exhibition Center. www.chicagoregency.hyatt.com

Music City Center Grand Opening Set for May

NASHVILLE, TN — Nashville Mayor Karl Dean announced that the grand opening celebration for the Music City Center will take place in May. Construction on the $585 million facility will be completed in April. Already more than 100 meetings and 800,000 room nights have been booked. The Music City Center totals 21.1 million sf, which includes 1.2 million sf of public space. Major features include a public art collection; Sixth Avenue that runs through the building, and the 57,500 sf Grand Ballroom, which seats 6,000 people. Green features include solar panels and a green roof. The building is on track to receive LEED Silver certification. www.musiccitycenter.com

Visit Orlando Names George Aguel as President and CEO

ORLANDO, FL — Visit Orlando Chair Paul Mears III on January 31 named George Armando Aguel president and CEO of Visit Orlando. “George is an incredibly accomplished industry leader, with extensive experience in both leisure and business travel,” said Mears. “His knowledge of the meetings and conventions industry, as well as his relationships throughout the travel and tourism segment, matches perfectly with the criteria that our search committee identified as priorities.”

Aguel’s distinguished career includes more than 35 years of executive-level experience in sales and marketing. Most recently as senior vice president of Global Corporate Alliances and Operating Participants at The Walt Disney Company, Aguel led world-wide management for the company’s strategic corporate alliance agreements. Previously, Aguel served for 22 years as senior vice president of Worldwide Sales and Services for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. “Orlando is a world-class destination and the Visit Orlando team is highly respected amongst its peers and the industry. I’m looking forward to working with the team and to have the opportunity to represent the destination and the company,” stated Aguel. A proven industry leader, Aguel has twice been recognized as one of the “25 Most Extraordinary Minds in Sales and Marketing” by Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International. He received the Academy of Leaders Award from the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) and was inducted into the Convention Industry Council Hall of Leaders. He’s also an ASAE Fellow and recipient of the Professional Convention Management Association Professional Achievement Award and the APEX award from Black Meetings & Tourism. He has served as chairman of Meeting Professionals International.

Aguel’s contributions to Central Florida include two years as chairman of Visit Orlando (2009-2010), vice chairman of the Central Florida Sports Commission and past member of the Orange County Tourism Development Council. He’s also a recipient of the Metro Orlando Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Don Quijote Award. “After nearly 23 years as an Orlando resident, my desire to serve this community has never been stronger,” said Aguel. “The Visit Orlando team leads the industry in collaborating with member partners and community partners to market our region around the globe. It’s an honor to have the opportunity to lead this highly respected team toward ensuring that Orlando not only remains the vibrant travel brand it is today, but continues to be positioned for prosperity in the decades to come.” www.orlandometro.com

Subject to availability for events held over select dates in 2013 and 2014.

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Great Hall Debuts at New Orleans Convention Center

NEW ORLEANS, LA — Officials of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center along with representatives from the city of New Orleans and the National Football League gathered on January 29 for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to debut the center’s new entrance and The Great Hall renovation [see photo on opposite page]. New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu and Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana Jay Dardenne called it a great day for New Orleans. “To be able to have an entranceway like this and an increase in the square footage of this magnificent arena is going to truly let New Orleans remain competitive with the cities we want to compete with. We want New Orleans to be mentioned in the same breath as all the other cities that people think of when they think of conventions,” said Dardenne.

The ceremony marked the completion of the 24-month, $50 million renovation of the former Hall A and La Louisiane Ballroom. The space was reconfigured into The Great Hall, a 60,300-sf, column-free ballroom, which is now the largest ballroom in New Orleans. The Great Hall was the official name of the convention center at the 1984 World’s Fair. The renovation also includes a 4,660-sf junior ballroom with a rooftop terrace named The Rivergate Room and 20,000 sf of prefunction space. The NFL Shop of Super Bowl XLVII (held February 3 in New Orleans) opened immediately following the ribbon-cutting, and was the first official use of the new space. [www.mccno.com]

MEETING VALUES

Hyatt Regency Atlanta, Atlanta, GA.

The Regency Club Level Buyout, which represents a 25 percent savings, provides the chance to have all attendees on one floor including additional amenities. Located on the 23rd floor of the Atrium Tower, the Regency Club has 33 rooms including three King Crown Suites, 22 King Rooms and eight Double Rooms. The offer, valid now through December 31, 2013, allows attendees to have access to the lounge area open daily from 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. and includes breakfast treats, mid-day munchies, evening bites and late-night snacks. Contact Casper van Eldik Theme, director of sales and marketing, casper.vet@hyatt.com, 404-460-6500, atlantaregency.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels-atlantaregency/.

Sheraton New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

Now through the end of 2013, planners are offered a 30th anniversary group offer, which includes the following: special anniversary breakfast, lunch and break menus all available for $30, a value that is 30 percent less than regular retail pricing; 30 percent off standard AV equipment and Internet; and 30 percent more Starwood Preferred Planners Points. Contact Ken Newman, director of group sales, ken.newman@sheraton.com, 504-595-5522, www.sheratonneworleans.com.

Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL.

Planners who book a group or meeting by June 30, 2013 to actualize in 2013 or 2014 will receive the following rewards: double Marriott Rewards points; complimentary Internet in meeting space; complimentary meeting, meal and exhibit space; complimentary airport transfers (groups of 100 or more); 10 percent discount on catering menus. Meetings booked by February 28, 2013 are eligible to receive an Exclusive Reward of up to 5 percent rebate to the group master account — must mention code ER2013. Contact Andrea Smith, director of sales, asmith@sawgrassmarriott.com, 904-280-7033, www.sawgrassmarriott.com.

SNAPSHOTS

1. President of the Ernest N. Morial Exhibition Hall Authority Melvin Rodrigue, with the assistance of city and state officials, cuts the ribbon to the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center’s Great Hall and Pedestrian Plaza renovation during opening ceremonies on January 29. 2. Shane Brassel, executive chef at Charles F. Knight Conference Center in St. Louis, MO, the winner of the U.S. position in the IACC-Americas qualifying cook-off, is presented the Copper Skillet by T.J. Firmiano, president of IACC-Americas. Brassel will represent the U.S. at the IACC’s 10th annual Copper Skillet Cooking Competition at Eaglewood Resort & Spa in March to vie for the crown of the International Conference Center Chef of the Year. 3. Mary Jo Valentine Blythe, president of Masterplan Inc., received the Associated Luxury Hotels International 2013 Chairman’s Award as “IAC Member of the Year,” the highest recognition ALHI presents any executive/planner annually, from David Gabri (r), president and CEO of ALHI, and G.A. Taylor Fernley, president and CEO of Fernley & Fernley Inc. 4. Omni Dallas Hotel received LEED Gold New Construction Certification, making it the largest LEED Gold hotel in the U.S. outside of Las Vegas, and one of the only LEED Gold hotels in Texas. Kimberly Lewis, senior vice president of community advancement and conferences and events, the U.S. Green Building Council, presented the hotel with a ceremonial plaque commemorating the certification. Pictured (l to r) are Darren Template, senior vice president, sales and services, Dallas Convention & Visitors Bureau (DCVB); Matthew Jones, executive vice president/CFO, DCVB; Dave Snell, Matthews Southwest; Lewis; Jonathan Krazts, executive director, North Texas Green Council; and Larry Major, managing director, Omni Dallas Hotel. 5. Meeting planners, event planners and incentive buyers throughout the state of Colorado enjoyed Destination Colorado’s Front Range Trade Show in December. 6. The Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI) Adrian Awards Gala was held in NYC on January 28. Lifetime Achievement Award winners Roger Dow (l), president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, and Howard Feiertag (r), faculty member at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, VA, were congratulated by Robert A. Gilbert, CHME, CHBA, president and CEO of HSMAI.
It’s Never Too Late to Set Goals to Increase Your Professional Development

It’s February, and I wouldn’t be surprised if those people who made New Year’s resolutions for January 1 have broken them already. But, it’s never too late to set goals for 2013. Personally, I don’t make New Year’s resolutions. I make goals during the entire year. And I set personal commitments as I need them.

If one of your goals or New Year’s resolutions is to increase your personal and professional development, here are a few ideas that you might want to consider. (Thanks to Catherine Lombardozzi, learning and development consultant at Learning 4 Learning Professionals, who helped further this thinking.)

Top 10 List of Resolutions to Increase Your Professional Development

1. Identify what you want to learn.
If you’ll state your intentions in writing, you’ll be surprised at how often you’ll find resources that can help you. Books, blog posts, magazine articles, research documents, presentations and other like-minded individuals will cross your path.

2. As Jennifer Lopez sings, “Follow the leader!”
Many thought leaders use social media to share their ideas. Find some in the areas of specialization that interest you and follow their information flow. Blog posts, white papers, research, tweets, and online and face-to-face presentations are a few ways to follow those leaders. Let them challenge you to think differently.

3. Read, read, read!
I’m an information junkie! I read a lot from blog posts to books to research. The Internet makes it so easy to read in short spurts or extended time. Reading information outside of the meetings and hospitality industry gives me new ideas of what I can apply in my conferences and meetings. I also like Brain Pickings Weekly (www.brainpickings.org), which is a weekly review and summary of some of the latest and coolest writings on what matters in the world today.

4. Find a mentor.
There’s nothing like having people around you who challenge your thinking, give honest feedback, and serve as a sounding board and source of inspiration! We all need that human interaction to accelerate our learning.

Similar to finding a mentor, it’s great to be part of an online community that challenges your thinking and provides support. Join a community in the area in which you want to grow personally and professionally. Sit back and observe the conversations and jump in when you are ready to engage.

Think about those things that keep you from reaching your development goals. Whether those barriers are your own habits, other people or circumstances, consider how to minimize their impact.

7. Capture your thoughts, insights, and reflections.
Write it down or type it. When you capture your learnings, it allows you to refer to those notes again and again. Consider journaling or blogging to share your thoughts. Comment directly on the pages of books that you read, write notes on top of blog posts and consider a bookmarking site of some type.

8. Become a saver and sharer.
Create a good electronic filing system to keep track of those interesting articles, blog posts and Web pages that you discover. Share interesting posts with your like-minded community, friends, colleagues and mentors.

9. Schedule daily time to think.
Find time and a space to think on a daily basis. When I was in an office, I would shut my door, open my blinds and just stare at the horizon. I’d let my mind drift and daydream. Sometimes I would think about a specific subject, meditate on it and chew the cud so to speak. It’s amazing what can become clear in moments of quiet reflection.

10. Take time to smell the roses.
We Americans are taking fewer and fewer vacations. It’s important to take time off from work and restore your soul. Don’t get caught up in the fear that if you take a vacation you’ll lose your job. Your body and mind need the time off from work, so take those vacations. What personal and professional resolutions would you add to this list? What tips do you have for ensuring that you grow professionally each year?

“Reading information outside of the meetings and hospitality industry gives me new ideas of what I can apply in my conferences and meetings.”

Jeff Hurt
is executive vice president, education and engagement, Velvet Chainsaw Consulting, and is based in Dallas, TX. Velvet Chainsaw Consulting exclusively services companies and associations with their annual meetings, conferences, education and events. They also help technology, service and membership organizations establish and execute plans and processes that result in improved business results. Hurt has worked in the events/nonprofit arena for more than 20 years including Keep America Beautiful as a consultant/trainer/writer; Keep Texas Beautiful as education coordinator; professional development manager for Meeting Professionals International; professional development manager for Promotional Products Association International; and director of education and events for the National Association of Dental Plans. He also has served on the board of directors for several North Texas, state and national charities and organizations. Contact Hurt at 214-886-3174 or jhurt@velvetchainsaw.com. www.velvetchainsaw.com

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Cruises and meetings, the potential for which has long been acknowledged, but far from being maximized. The cruise lines seemed to settle on an industry-wide attitude of benign neglect towards this market, even as a loyal and steadily increasing (although still small) percentage of incentive travel program managers and meeting planner professionals continued to select the cruise ship option.

In recent years, that attitude has notably changed. Cruise lines are now actively cultivating the meeting and incentive (MiI) market with new onboard amenities and services designed specifically for travel management companies. Not only is optimistic about the untapped potential of the MiI market, she has the experience and motivation to lead the industry to better tap into that market.

**Top Sea Suites**

Cruise line meeting and incentive specialists Landry & Kling offer their top eight cruise suites ideal for planning and networking, private meetings and dining, or as an incentive reward.

Suites were evaluated based on size and layout, meeting areas, hospitality features, and ideal for planning and networking, private meetings and dining, or as an incentive reward.

**Cruise Meetings Taskforce**

Cruises and meetings continue to seek out innovative settings that will spur attendance — onboard meetings are gradually becoming more the rule than the exception. "Cruise meetings are getting more popular," adds Kling. "But not in one specific segment as in the past when cruise venues were used mainly for incentive travel programs. Now it’s an ever widening variety of meetings or events."

"Planners are now realizing that a cruise can support their new meetings needs, whether it is more a strict meeting or a meeting-incentive hybrid," says Duffy. "The ships today have the meeting space, the technology, the Wi-Fi. People were assuming there was not enough variety, but the fact is that most corporate groups contain different demographics, and there are activities for people who are more sedentary to full-blown spas, fitness centers, rock climbing and a range of options."
Cruising Covers All Clothier’s Bases

The potentially wide appeal of cruising is why Jonathan Kierman, senior director of store operations for Catherines Plus Sizes, has planned his programs exclusively with cruise ships for the last three of the past 15 years. “We have a very diverse work force in terms of age — we have baby boomers to Generation Y associates. “Finding an incentive that is attractive to all is a challenge. We have discovered that by offering a cruise, the options of what our associates would be interested in participating are tremendous and give us a broad base to work from.”

Like most incentive programs, a ship must accommodate meeting components for Kierman’s program. “We need a meeting room with AV capability for our ‘town hall meeting’ as well as an up-scale venue for our awards ceremony.”

In addition to having the facility to accommodate meetings, cruise lines offer streamlined pricing, inclusive packages and other aspects that enhance the return on investment (ROI) of an event. Compared to other venues, Kierman calls cruising, “extremely affordable and in a lot of cases it is cheaper. Our intentions for 2013 are to keep our budget flat to 2012. It seems like there are more options today than four years when I first began exploring these options. I believe this is because of the economy and more venues looking to acquire corporate business.”

Unlike other destinations that Kierman has utilized, which include popular resorts and cities, he discovered that cruising offers a built-in motivation for the targeted employees, eventually optimizing ROI. “Achieving the status of President’s Club has its own inherent ROI, but over the last three years since we have changed our venue to a cruise, we have seen a much larger ROI and even more so, it has become a driver of our culture. The phrase ‘Are you on the boat?’ is alive in all of our stores and a big motivator for the teams.”

Value and Flexibility

Simplified pricing — as opposed to à la carte — is an in-demand contract issue in an era of widespread belt-tightening and heightened emphasis on ROI. “Planners understand that (with cruises) there are so many more inclusions, and it becomes unnecessary to bring in décor, entertainment, AV, etc.,” says Wallack. “What they may not know is how much more flexible the cruise lines have become in terms of confirming exclusive group events, offering alternative restaurant dining buyouts, customizing group shore excursions, allowing complete takeover of the conference space.”

Cruise lines are now also able to handle the needs of large groups. “Some programs have gotten so large that only a mega ship can accommodate everyone at one time,” says Wallack. “If you look at Mexico and the Caribbean, there are only a handful of hotels that work for large groups needing over 1,000 rooms for example.”

Unlike what is often the case when an event grows, making vendor and venue negotiations more complex, cruising contracting can remain less costly and convoluted. “A cruise is generally less expensive and is by far more inclusive,” says Wallack. “One rate covers meals, entertainment, onboard activities, port charges, taxes and gratuities. There is also an on board/room rate for inclusive liquor. Onboard credit can help a client handle spa treatments, shore excursions, alternative restaurant charges, etc. It is very simple.”

The cost differential between a land-based and sea-based M&I program is significant. “Costs can range from 15-40 percent less with a ship, but participants feel they’re getting more,” agrees Kling. “Planners save time and shrink budgets, because there’s no need to plan menus: Multicourse meals are provided in a lovely dining room where there’s no need to pay for centerpieces or lighting, or linens or AV equipment. It surprises us to see the many ‘gotcha items’ that planners have to try to negotiate from the resort fee to the Internet, AV services, charges to pick up packages shipped for your trade show, parking. Whereas there just aren’t that many negotiable items with the cruise structure.”

For Duffy, the ME&I Taskforce was only the beginning of conveying the value of cruising to the planner profession. “Planners aren’t aware of how an event can be customized on a ship, or the air-to-sea options available that make flying into one destination and out of another affordable, or that cruise lines can work with you on how close to the date you need to book. Planners assume their needs cannot be accommodated by a cruise, and the opposite is true.”

International Reach

International cruising options are a natural fit for companies that are expanding their global reach and international work forces. “We are seeing more globalization of companies, and cruise ships cater to that global market,” says Duffy. “You rarely see pure incentive programs, so as the popularity of meetings-incentives hybrids grows, more companies are running these programs around the world. The companies themselves are now global. The ships not only go around the world, they are able to accommodate all the language and food demands of international attendees and participants more easily than any other venues. As companies become more global, cruise ships as settings for events will grow.”

Cruise News

Celebrity Cruises. In 2012, Celebrity invested $140 million to update its four Millennium-class ships, adding several popular Solstice-class dining venues and other enhancements. In the summer of 2013, Celebrity Cruises will be offering its broadest lineup of modern luxury op-
tions in Europe, and bringing Solstice Class style to Alaska for the first time. The newly “Solsticized” ships will visit 25 countries from seven departure ports and a total of 88 destinations in Europe alone. Celebrity Solstice, the sleek, 2,850-pas-
senger flagship of the Solstice Class fleet, will become the first of its class to of-
er Alaska excursions, joining Celebrity Century and Celebrity Millennium in pairing Celebrity’s signature cuisine, activities and service with the region’s breathtaking scenery. Rounding out “Since we have changed our venue to a cruise...it has
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We invite you to make the comparison for yourself by including us on your next RFP. Our Corporate and Incentive team looks forward to assisting you in planning a program that meets all of your needs and your budget.

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Carnival

Today’s Agenda

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SERIOUS BUSINESS. SERIOUS VALUE. SERIOUS FUN.

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I t wasn’t that long ago, before the pervasive and cumulative powers of the Internet, social networking and mobile media began to transform the meeting industry in astonishingly short order, that destination marketing meant a well-rehearsed sales pitch from a DMO (a.k.a. CVB) or a slick Meeting Planning Guide in the mail. Today, however, des- tination marketing has taken on much more dimension — and that includes not just destination sells itself to meeting planners, but how planners, in turn, sell it to attendees.

At the moment, however, it’s still the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) that have the most to gain — or lose.

“Meeting planners nowa- days don’t have to be as re- liant as they once were on CVBs for marketing information, especially before the meeting,” says Tom Martin, founder and principal, of New- orleans-based digital market- ing firm Conversa Digital, which launched a Digital Strategy Practice customized for DMOs in 2011. “The key factor has been that there is so much information avail- able from so many sources other than the CVBs in today’s digital world.”

But at the same time, Martin notes, the information gathering process is time-consuming for planners constant- ly being tasked to do more with less. Therein, he says, lies the current oppor- tunity for innovative DMOs to regain the high ground when it comes to tactical and logistical assistance. “And that’s why progressive CVBs are beginning to curate current destination information and pro- vide it in a digital manner,” Martin says, “so that planners can just pull that infor- mation directly into their own marketing materials and push it right through to at- tendees in an almost frictionless way.”

Some Planners Say “DMOs are becoming the curate current destination information and provide it in a digital manner. Planners can just pull that information directly into their own marketing materials and push it right through to attendees in an almost frictionless way.”

Team Up To Enhance the Destination and Build Attendance

By John Buchanhan

And, she adds, because she has been getting just such in-depth insights from Orlando, she has brought one of her major conferences there five times since 2003, and also is booked in Orlando for September 2013. “The reason that kind of support is so important to me,” Bergeson says, “is that our attendees are very so- cial, so having a city that offers good re- staurants and bars and other activities is very important to us. But all destinations, even second-tier destinations, have re- staurants and bars and attractions. The dif- ference to me is between being left to your own devices to learn what those are and how individual ones might benefit your involvement involved, because we believe that en- hances our chances of success for landing and selling the meeting.”

She cites one major example from 2010: “We were working on a major meet- ing that involved a large number of at- tendees and a large number of exhibitors,” she says. “And there was a lot of compe- tition among major destinations to get that meeting. And we could not have achieved the success that we did without having the entire community pull together. What that meant was that when we went to meet with the hosts and plan- ners of the meeting, we brought a num- ber of people with us, including a county commissioner, a representative of the mayor’s office, and a top local business executive in the company’s industry. We also brought their chairman and their presi- dent/general manager of one of our major hotels, the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress. And we even went so far as to bring in a major food critic who could talk about Orlando as a culinary destination.”

For another meeting, a large health- care conference, Visit Orlando leveraged the city’s growing medical infrastructure and brought in Nikki Moon, president of the Employer Hospital and Orlando Health to explain the unique benefits that Orlando offers to medical and healthcare meetings.

The essential point, Runzler says, is to bring more scope and context to a destination’s selling proposition. “I can talk about the number of hotel rooms and our infrastructure and what we deliver for a major meeting,” she says. “But what I think really sells a destination today in an integrated community is bringing from the very beginning part of that is showing that a range of representatives of the community are all in tune with each other when it comes to showing what an integrated destination is. And the other point is to bring in the CVBs just made it very easy for us. Knowing as much as possible about what there is to do in the destination is very important to the overall success of the meeting.”

Mark Champa, Director of Meetings and Events
H&R Block, Kansas City, MO

real experts to make important points about what sets a particular destination apart from another, and even talks about the culinary scene in Orlando. It’s another thing entirely for a recognized food critic to explain what the city has to offer. And for a meeting today, the qual- ity and diversity of the food in a destina- tion is an important part of a meeting, whether that’s a dine-around program or it’s a matter of attendees entertain- ing their colleagues or clients.

Building Attendance

Closely related to such efforts, Runzler says — and a key benefit to planners whose meetings are voluntary in atten- dance, such as conferences for indepen- dent salespeople or customers — is a syn- ergy between CVB sponsorship and a destination.

Nikki Moon, vice president of con- vention sales at the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, agrees. “That is more important now than ever,” she says, “and for many clients that is an expensive and time-consuming process, so we have come to know for doing a lot of that for them. We’re their right-hand people in helping to build the program and making the meeting a success.”

Moon preaches a doctrine of well- organized, community-based marketing

efforts. “Today,” she says, “a good CVB is an important part of a company’s meetings department and there are still a lot of planners who don’t realize that 99 percent of the services are complimentary.”

Moreover, Moon says, such comprehensive services, based on the most current information available, such as a new restaurant or a new attraction that will offer something special during a meeting’s dates, are especially important for a destination as diverse as New Orleans, whose broad culture and distinct individual neighborhoods require an education for planners. Given that, Moon says, the CVB works hard to match the destination to the needs of a particular meeting, then merchandises what it has to offer via micro-websites or electronic newsletters that keep attendees informed.

Getting Social

Although there are CVBs that are creating genuine innovation when it comes to marketing, the next great frontier will be innovative use of digital marketing and social media to drive attendees interest in and benefit from a destination before and during the meeting, says Martin.

“But at this point,” he says, “I would also say that even the most progressive CVBs that are doing it have only begun to scratch the surface. Right now, the innovation we’re seeing among CVBs is really around platforms and execution. So they’re curating information or bundling it at a platform level, like a website or a blog that a meeting planner can point to. But the reason they’ve only scratched the surface is that it hasn’t really gone beyond that because we’ve been taught for 50 years, both in terms of searching for it and usage, that the freedom to go out on their own, in the way that they have oysters in an oyster bar that every corner is some little mom and pop restaurant that the locals all know about, but tourists don’t. Take them in and let them have oysters in an oyster bar that isn’t so well known. Or better yet, take them somewhere that can teach them how to shock oysters. Or take them to a local crab boil that is sufficient. It’s about doing things that really allow people to attend something that is truly local and not the kind of things that tourists or meeting attendees normally do. The idea is to give attendees experiences that most people will never have.”

The Power of Random

In order to get to that level of individualized experience, Martin encourages truly forward-thinking CVBs and planners to embrace what he calls “the power of random.” And that’s because random experiences are where real memories are created, he says.

For example, Martin relates, instead of the typical dine-around program that features the best-known tourist restaurants in a given city, give attendees the freedom to go out on their own, in a place like Preservation Hall or an Oyster House in New Orleans. You have to go deeper into the destination than that, because those kinds of things are at the typical expectation of a tourist level. You have to help them discover “what’s around the corner.”

To get to the next level of deriving maximum enjoyment from a destination, he says, “you have to understand that there’s a place like New Orleans, every corner is some little mom and pop restaurant that the locals all know about, but tourists don’t. Take them in and let them have oysters in an oyster bar that isn’t so well known. Or better yet, take them somewhere that can teach them how to shock oysters. Or take them to a local crab boil that is sufficient. It’s about doing things that really allow people to attend something that is truly local and not the kind of things that tourists or meeting attendees normally do. The idea is to give attendees experiences that most people will never have.”

Putting It All Together

As destination marketing becomes more about giving attendees what they will benefit most, everyone agrees. Eighty percent of our attendees are men, so they are interested in steak houses and bars and the best golf courses,” says Bergeson, who agrees that such information innovation on what’s best or new and hot in the destination will become more and more important over the next 18 months. “As we’re going to see a couple of really smart, innovative CVBs leverage the first mover advantage of digital innovation to capture the minds and business of meeting planners before the rest of the industry figures it out,” says Martin.
After a half-century of relative predictability, with "rubber chicken" becoming a clichéd reference to the typical food and beverage served at many meetings and conventions, the free being delivered to attendees has undergone a transformational upgrade.

Rubber chicken and traditional buffet line setups have been supplanted by fresher foods and more creative choices, notes Karla Spaeth, chair of hospitality management program and director of facilities and events management at Northwood University in Midland, MI, and operations director at a small hotel owned and operated by the school.

Erik Pederson, food and beverage director at the Garden of the Gods Club in Colorado Springs, a rustic venue located at the boutique hotel Lodge at the Garden of the Gods, also sees a sea change in how F&B is being handled.

"Food is no longer an isolated consideration, Picciano says. As the meeting industry continues to demand recovery, food and beverage is being more integrated into the overall experience."

Courtney Ermac, event specialist at third-party planning company Dynamic Events in Vancouver, WA, says that ever-growing demand for special dietary restrictions or preferences is another current trend.

"We do a lot of meetings for Microsoft that have a very international attendee base," says Ermac, who hosted a 10,000-attendee conference for the software giant at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas last November. "So our dietary requirements often go beyond just simple religious restrictions like kosher or Halal diets. We're now seeing a lot of requests for gluten-free food. That is skyrocketing. We also see a lot of requests now for vegetarian food."

Ermac sees the broadening trend as a natural evolution of the increased role of attendees in selecting and personalizing meetings to their personal preferences. "It's no longer just checking off chicken or beef on a card," she says. "We ask them if they have allergies or any special requests for food. And as a result of that, we're seeing a lot more requests. But we're also more flexible in our requests for kosher and Halal food, too."

A related and growing trend, Ermac says, is growing demand for more healthful food. And that, she says, is a natural outgrowth of the ever-increasing awareness of and interest in health and wellness. "They are understanding more and more that lighter, healthier foods mean more alert, attentive attendees and therefore a more successful meeting," Ermac says. "Lighter food usually makes people feel better. It's likely that attendees just checking off chicken or beef on a card," she says. "We also see a lot of requests now for vegetarian food."

Ermac says dining in the U.S. is changing, especially from a nutritional standpoint. "The industry is aware people are worried about their health and fitness," he says. "We've even gone 'hyper-local' by incorporating honey from our own rooftop hives into menus and dishes. Another good current example of what's happening is a food station that serves fresh local mushrooms with items such as locally sourced goat cheese. And that kind of thing doesn't just mean better food. It also means there's a story behind your food."

"Attendees are tired of the same old chicken and vegetable combinations. Today's catering is about more uniqueness and variety.

Karla Spaeth Chair of Hospitality Management Program and Director of Facilities and Events Management Northwood University Midland, MI

"Food is no longer an isolated consideration, Picciano says. As the meeting industry continues to demand recovery, food and beverage is being more integrated into the overall experience."
Younger people do not like to be dictated F&B. And the reason is simple, Spaeth to young attendees. Their palettes are and told that ‘these are your choices for dinner.’ That is no longer acceptable more specialty bars and more creative more sophisticated, and their expecta-
ness and variety.”

Getting Creative
As a result of such basic trends, another trend is evolving: planners are becoming more creative in the use of F&B. And the reason is simple, Spaeth says. “Attendees are tired of the same old chicken and vegetable combinations. Today’s catering is about more unique- ness and variety!”

That’s especially important to young er attendees, she says. “They are de-
manding a lot more variety in what they eat and drink. They want more options Younger people do not like to be dictated to and told that ‘these are your choices for dinner.’ That is no longer acceptable more specialty bars and more creative more sophisticated, and their expecta-
ness and variety.”

Russell actually experienced that iteration of the concept at MFI’s 2012 World Education Conference in St. Louis. “They did it as part of their opening night re-
er about where and how they spend their money, so they can still end up being creative and also get good value.

Bottom-Line Concerns
One concern among planners is the increasing tendency for meeting planners because attendees can leave the hotel and go a short distance to get real food-truck food. That can be a nice option if you’re not providing lunch to attendees. It gives them a chance to get a taste of real local food instead of eating every meal in the hotel.”

Russell agrees that making F&B more creative and interactive is a major cur-
trend. For example,” she says, “a lot of planners now treat F&B as more of a teambuilding exercise in doing things that are different and unique pated in one at a meeting where they gave us certain foods and people had to come up with a dish that you presented for judging.”

Even though hotels are getting tough on food and beverage as part of their meeting plans and can and can’t be negotiated.”

Russell says she also agrees that buffet lines are becoming more creative by allowing attendees more options for putting to-
gether a personalized pasta dinner or a creative food-truck type of experience.

“They concept originally was to actually bring in local food trucks to an event as a way of adding variety to the meeting,” Russell says. “People had the chance to walk up and get a burger and fries or a taco. But then planners started to realize that if you’re having an event in a ballroom where you normally serve people in a buffet line with food in chafing dishes.”

It also allows planners more pre-
cise pricing and budgeting. “You know exactly what you will consume and so there’s no nickel- and dimeing for various add-ons or enhance-
ments that carry additional charges,” Clough says.

Jacy Russell, CMP, senior meeting manager at independent meeting planning company Spear One in Irving, TX, sees an evolution of the popularity of food trucks as a trend that is here to stay. “The concept originally was to actually bring in local food trucks to an event as a way of adding variety to the meeting,” Russell says. “People had the chance to walk up and get a burger and fries or a taco. But then planners started to realize that if you’re having an event in a ballroom where you normally serve people in a buffet line with food in chafing dishes.”

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Clough says. “And if you really start to think cre-
tively, the possibilities are limitless,” Russell says.

Budgerts Are Back
Thankfully for planners and hotels, F&B budgets are returning to relatively normal for the first time in years, Zahn says. “Companies are finally spending a little bit more on food and beverage and functions,” he says. But, he cautions, he also expects bud-
gets to remain tight — and scrutinized — into the foreseeable future. “I don’t think budgets will ever get back to the pre-free-spending days of 2007 and 2008, before the recession,” he says. “And I think they will be even more scrutinized this year.”

Unfortunately, not all current F&B trends favor planners and make for a better meeting.

“Historical data can also help you uncover in negotiating... because you will know what your past data and metrics are.”

Based on her experience, a key con-
cern of Buehler’s at the moment is mis-

Lobster, Champagne on Hold
Although there is plenty of good news about how F&B is recovering its role as an essential component of a meeting, there are still challenges that remain. Thanks to ongoing concerns about optics, or perceptions from shareholders or the media, lobster and champagne have vir-
tually disappeared from most menus. “Lobster has the perception of being very expensive,” Picciano says. “So consumers will say, ‘We’re New York. Demand is high for what we have available, and we don’t have a lot of room for flexibility. We can get the prices we want!’ And based on that, there are now some hotels that we will just not go back to.”

A countervailing tactic, Buehler says, is to negotiate an F&B credit based on total expenditures or the size of the meeting. The larger issue, she says, is to have planners better understand what the hotel’s real costs are and where they can save money. “One good example is what most hotels charge for coffee,” she says. “In the past, planners shied away from negotiating coffee because it’s not seen as a big cost. But on a per cup basis, coffee is usually a lot more expensive than a bottle of soda or juice.”
Arizona is the kind of meeting destination that if you haven’t been there lately, it’s time to schedule another site inspection trip. No matter how many times you may have brought a group to this sunny Southwestern state, there is always something new and exciting to discover.

Patrice Trusdell, CMP, vice president of the meeting planning firm Beggs Chung Incorporated in Norristown, PA, kicked off the new year by planning an internal business meeting in Arizona for one of her clients. The venue chosen for the 80-attendee event was The Wigwam, an iconic 400-acre resort west of Phoenix that was built in 1918 as a retreat for the Ohio-based executives of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber company. Times have changed a bit, though. Back then, guests were given a horse along with their room key when they checked in.

Trusdell hadn’t been to The Wigwam (331 casitas and suites; more than 100,000 sf of meeting space) for about 10 years, and she was very pleased with what she found. Last year, the luxury resort, which is under new management, unveiled a $7 million rejuvenation project. “All of it was well spent,” she comments. "They have a new entrance approach. They completely reconstructed and reconfigured the lobby. They’ve made it more like a living room would be when you walk in. It’s much more approachable and sets the tone for what the property is.

"The meeting space is outstanding," she continues. "They have a lot of it. Their rooms-to-meeting space ratio is phenomenal for a planner, and it’s in very good shape. The guest rooms are so large comparative to the square footage in most guest rooms. For standard rooms, they’re oversized, and they’re in huge, stately palms, but then they also have citrus trees. Off the front lobby, there are two huge palm trees that are so large comparative to the square footage in most guest rooms. They’re there for guests to take that are grown on-property. It’s one of the choices for Southwest-style teambuilding activities include a chili cook-off, Wild West Olympics (such as cowboy hat frisbee) and covered-wagon building.

The JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge (950 guest rooms; 240,000 sf of meeting space), which just celebrated its 10th anniversary, is an earth friendly resort. Its long list of initiatives for green meetings includes extensive recycling (including in-room bins), the use of recycled paper products, electronic invoices for group events, water and energy conservation, and chemical reduction practices.

Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa’s (500 guest rooms; 100,000 sf of meeting space) signature fine-dining restaurant, Kai, was recently honored with its seventh AAA Five Diamond designation. The restaurant is renowned for its innovative, Native American-inspired cuisine that incorporates locally grown ingredients from the Gila River Indian Community.

One of the newest and most unique special event locations in Phoenix is the Musical Instrument Museum, a 200,000 sf venue filled with nearly 450 active exhibits showcasing musical instruments from around the world. The museum offers multiple areas for private events, including courtyards, the MIM Café and a 299-seat music theater equipped with state-of-the-art acoustics and projection capabilities.

Scottsdale As a meeting destination, Scottsdale never stagnates. New additions include the $20 million, 52,380 sf conference center recently unveiled at The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess (649 guest rooms). The new venue, which includes the 23,000-sf Palomino Ballroom, brings the property’s total meeting space to approximately 150,000 sf. In January, The Fairmont launched its new spa concept Well & Being at Willow Stream Spa, created by Trilogy Spa Holdings. As the first of its kind in the nation, the program draws from a wide range of health, wellness, nutrition, integrative medicine, fitness and spa offerings to create customizable wellness programs. Several Scottsdale properties are also sporting fresh new looks. Last summer, The Scottsdale Plaza Resort (404 guest rooms; 40,000 sf of meeting space) completed a $3 million property-wide renovation project, which included updates to all guest rooms and suites.

The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa (732 guest rooms; 130,000 sf of meeting space) recently invested approximately $5 million to enhance its meeting space. The resort’s new venue is the 11,300-sf Trailblazer Ballroom, which overlooks the golf course. The Westin also recently added the Flowrider, a new water-sport activity that looks like surfing but mimics the moves and ride of snowboarding. Group competitions can be arranged at the new water attraction.

Montelucia Resort & Spa (253 guest rooms and 40 suites, 100,000 sf of meeting space), a luxurious Mediterranean-style resort located in the shadow of Camelback Mountain, helps planners envision their next meeting setting with an “inspiration gallery” on its website, www.montelucia.com. The site also offers interactive floor plans to help planners visualize the flow of their meetings.

In the Meeting Village at Enchantment Resort, the Village Terrace offers breathtaking views of Sedona’s majestic red rock formations.

More Phoenix

The Sheraton Phoenix Downtown (more than 1,000 guest rooms; 47 suites; more than 80,000 sf of meeting space) located near the Phoenix Convention Center, is offering two special services for groups: A link to e-dmc, a Web-based destination management service and “Onsite Specialty Events,” budget-friendly events that eliminate the need to arrange (and pay for) transportation to offsite venues — ideal for planners looking to reduce their meeting’s carbon footprint.

Also located near the Phoenix Convention Center, the Renaissance Phoenix Downtown Hotel (428 guest rooms; 60,000 sf of meeting space) is offering special incentives for groups requiring 10 or more nights on peak nights for meetings that are booked by the end of the year. Qualifying groups can choose three incentives from a list that includes free Internet access in attendees’ guest rooms, triple Marriott points, VIP amenities and 30 percent allowable attrition.

The Pointe Hilton Tapatio Cliffs Resort (584 suites; more than 65,000 sf of meeting space) in Phoenix makes it easy to plan offsite events and team-building activities thanks to the resort’s partnership with Southwest Conference Planners. Offsite activities offered are as diverse as desert hikes, shopping tours and visits to Wrigley Mansion, the 16,850-sf, 24-room estate once used as a winter home for the chewing gum magnate’s family. Some of the choices for Southwest-style teambuilding activities include a chili cook-off, Wild West Olympics (such as cowboy hat frisbee) and covered-wagon building.

The Arizona Kitchen at The Wigwam is reserved for group meetings and events for hosted dinner and special culinary experiences.

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Fountain Hills, is a versatile indoor and outdoor special event facility. The Orange Sky Patio, adjacent to Talking Stick Resort’s fine-dining Arizona Cowboy College, offers a wide range of outdoor activities, including trail rides, jeep tours, campfires and kayaking.

The Scottsdale Convention & Visitors Bureau has released its 2013 Discover Scottsdale meeting planners guide, which includes details on accommodations, activities and amenities as well as a list of offsite venues, sample itineraries and incentive ideas. The new guide is available at www.MeetInScottsdale.com.

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Town, “and the city offers plenty of Western-themed activities.

Birch was referring to the extraordinarily beautiful setting the resort occupies. Enchantment Resort (218 guest rooms; 13,000 sf of indoor meeting space plus 20,000 sf of outdoor space) is set on 70 acres of a secluded canyon and is surrounded by breathtaking red rock formations. Sedona is located just two hours north of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, and while Birch’s attendees simply rent-ed cars, limousine service is available that will bring guests right to the resort’s front door.

The resort also has all of the elements needed to stage themed events such as a Polynesian evening complete with Tiki torches, a Tiki hut façade, carved wood artifacts and fishing nets. Another popular choice is the country-western theme, which features jail, hotel, livery stable, and saloon facades and props that include hay bales, saddles and split-rail fencing.

By day, Scottsdale’s Talking Stick Resort (497 guest rooms more than 100,000 sf of indoor and outdoor function space) offers plenty of space for taking care of business, and when it’s time for leisure, the resort offers so many options that attendees won’t have to leave the property unless they really want to. There’s a 240,000-sf casino, a 14th-floor spa offering panoramic views of the Valley of the Sun, 36 holes of Troon-managed golf, and multiple dining and entertainment venues including a 650-seat showroom; and the Orange Sky restaurant and lounge on the 15th floor featuring outdoor patios with panoramic views of the surrounding desert landscape.

Scottsdale has long been called the “West’s Most Western Town, and the city offers plenty of Western-themed activities to boot. Planners who want to help their attendees channel their inner wranglers can head ‘em up and move ‘em out to the Arizona Cowboy College for lessons on roping and herd-ing cattle. Fort McDowell Adventures, located in nearby Fountain Hills, is a versatile indoor and outdoor special event venue offering multiple scenic settings, including the mission-style La Puesta del Sol (Spanish for “the setting sun”). Fort McDowell Adventures, which is conveniently located just four miles from the Radisson Fort McDowell Resort & Casino, also offers a wide range of outdoor activities, including trail rides, jeep tours, campfires and kayaking.

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Landing on what he thought was an island beach on April 3, 1513, Ponce de Leon claimed "La Florida – The Flowering Land" for Spain. Historians dispute just where Ponce landed, some believing it was somewhere between St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra Beach, and others finding evidence he first found terra firma on Melbourne beach south of Cape Canaveral. No matter the longitudinal landing spot, Florida celebrates its 500th birthday this spring with a year-long commemoration called Viva Florida 500.

St. Augustine, of course, lays its own claim to Ponce de Leon fame with historical favorites such as the 125-year-old Ponce de Leon Hotel, now home of Flagler College; Fountain of Youth Archeological Park; the Ponce de Leon Landing; and more. Renaissance World is next to the World Golf Hall of Fame, which together with the resort offers 101,000 sf of function space. La Terraza is a recent addition to the resort’s outdoor event space, accommodating groups of up to 2,000 people and featuring advanced technology to rival an indoor ballroom. Groups now enjoy privileges at the exclusive Seranata Beach Club overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, an easy complimentary shuttle ride away.

Jacksonville Area
On Amelia Island, just outside of the city of Jacksonville, the Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort has embarked on an $85 million makeover scheduled to be completed this spring. The conference center will gain 30,000 sf — inclusive of a 16,800 sf ballroom and new prefunction and exhibit area — for a total of 80,000 sf of flexible meeting and event space. The addition of 155 new guest rooms including 26 suites will bring its guest room total to 404 oceanfront rooms. Directly off the hotel lobby, the new outdoor area will offer the largest pool deck in Northeast Florida with tiered lounge seating. The resort also will feature floor-to-ceiling windows with Atlantic Ocean views and additional restaurants.

Just south of Jacksonville in Ponte Vedra Beach is the famed Ponte Vedra Inn & Club (250 guest rooms; 25,000 sf meeting space) built in 1928 and joined by the Lodge & Club in 1989. The AAA Five Diamond property’s amenities include the largest spa in north Florida at 30,000 sf, 36 holes of golf, including links-style with ocean breezes, 15 tennis courts, an oceanfront gym, four restaurants, three lounges, eight shops and boutiques, and four heated pools in a beachfront setting.

Tampa
Michael Pelehach, president of Shuster Corporation in New Bedford,
The resort had everything that we needed. It was remote so we had the flexibility to be able to set up for all of the different events that we were having, whether it was dinner poolside or guests coming in and utilizing the conference room. The setups were done very well. They were done very quickly and efficiently. All of that made for a very, very good meeting.”

Pelehach was initially concerned about how far the resort was from the airport (about a 30-minute drive, he says). “But Mark assured me that they could help us out with transportation. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the fact that it’s in the middle of nowhere, because sales guys, of course, like to stay up late when they’re at a sales meeting and head into town. I wanted to have a more controlled atmosphere. The resort had everything that we needed. It was remote so guys couldn’t jump into a car and go to the bars or anything like that, and it worked out very well.

Saddlebrook’s room setup was also a major factor in Pelehach’s decision. “What we try to do is to save money is put guys in the same room,” he explains. “You can’t really do that at a lot of these other resorts because you’ve just got a hotel room. In the case of Saddlebrook, we had two-bedroom units. They’re almost like a condo where each person had their own bathroom and bedroom so they had their privacy, and then the living room and the balcony were the shared spaces. Nobody had a problem with it. We were able to do it as economically as possible.

The resort also worked well for all of Pelehach’s meeting needs. “We had some guest speakers come in. Saddlebrook had the flexibility to be able to set up for all of the different needs. “We had some guest speakers come in. Saddlebrook had the flexibility to be able to set up for all of the different

Naples

On the Gulf along the Paradise Coast is the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club (317 guest rooms; 34,000 sf of meeting space), the only beachfront resort in Southwest to claim an onsite golf course. Originally built in 1927, the 18-hole championship course was enhanced and refurbished in 2011. HB’s on the Gulf is the city of Naples’ only beachfront restaurant

“The resort had everything that we needed. It was remote so guys couldn’t jump into a car and go to the bars or anything like that, and it worked out very well.”

Michael Pelehach
President
Shuster Corporation
New Bedford, MA

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and a popular draw for sunset-watchers. Another “only” claim to fame comes with the resort’s most recent renovation, just completed last month, which included the opening of Naples’ only Gulf-view, beachfront ballroom, the 5,000-sf Everglades Room, featuring a wall of windows. Upgrades over the last five years included the expansion of the Sunset Beach Bar & Grill and beachfront pool complex. The resort, family owned and operated for three generations, is nearby the tony 5th Avenue shopping and dining district.

The Panhandle

For Ron Black, director of human resources for Southern Pipe & Supply headquartered in Meridian, MS, the theme for his Florida meetings might as well be “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” His company has been hosting three recognition events at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa (598 guest rooms; more than 32,000 sf of meeting space), located in Florida’s Panhandle, an average of once every three years for the past 25 years.

“The primary events that we hold there are our recognition events for our top managers, top salespeople and top customers,” Black explains. “It’s a phenomenal location physically, and they do a good job. Needless to say, we would not return as much as we do regardless of how beautiful the beach and the grounds are if the people weren’t high quality and didn’t deliver a great experience for me as the planner, and, more importantly, for our guests attending.

“I think without question, the No. 1 thing about the resort is that it is directly on the beach,” he continues. “There’s a large section of beach. There is a resort area called Sandestin, so the Hilton is a resort within a resort. It is the only property of its type, literally from Pensacola to Panama City, that is directly on the beach, right on the Gulf.

Black’s three recognition events, which are typically attended by anywhere from 60–85 couples, include the Chairman’s Weekend for customer appreciation, the Champion’s Club for store managers and the President’s Club for the company’s sales team.

“Our events are strictly all fun,” he notes. “We believe in giving people a lot of free time. Typically, for our events down there we offer deep sea fishing trips, we offer golf. Within the Sandestin resort they have 72 holes of golf. You can walk out of the Hilton and practically be on the golf course, and they are great golf courses. We also offer visits to the spa, and sailing has really become popular over the last several visits.”

Black also puts a unique twist on the traditional hospitality suite. “They give us a part of the pool area that we rope off and call it Club Southern Pipe. Every afternoon that we’re there, from noon to five, they give us this area. We’ll put live entertainment out there, a guitar player doing Jimmy Buffett, James Taylor, that type of music, and our people just kind of come and go. We have dedicated servers. At all of these events, everything is carte blanche. They can charge anything to eat, drink — anything they do at the resort — to their room and we take care of it.”

He explained that the Hilton’s main bar and restaurant, Barefoot’s Beachside Bar & Grill, has been totally rebuilt after being destroyed by a fire about two years ago. “The fire at Barefoot’s offered them the opportunity to literally come back and redesign it. It’s 100 times better than it used to be. It’s now this massive open-air bar and restaurant with seating inside and tons of seating outside. It’s a great place.”

Black continues to tweak his programs. “We try to change things up, but at the same time we keep the constant things that we know people enjoy doing. We do take events to the beach at times. The resort does a great job of doing dinners on the beach. We’ve also taken folks down to the beach for a bonfire and to roast marshmallows and do s’mores. Instead

It was all fun, sun and sailing during Southern Pipe & Supply’s Chairman’s Club Weekend, held at Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa in the Panhandle city of Destin, where pristine beaches of white sugar sand and the Gulf’s clear turquoise waters beckon.

Photo courtesy of Jack A. Neal, Photographer

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of doing Club Southern Pipe up at the pool, we’ve done it on the beach and made it a sports theme with volleyball and races in the sand and sandcastle building competitions. They have a great recreation staff that’s got more ideas than you can possibly use.”

When guests want to enjoy some nightlife, Black explained that they can get the best of both worlds. You can go there and have a very laidback weekend or you can leave there more tired and so productive. Know this. No tweet, snapshot or posting will ever be enough.

OCEANFRONT EXCELLENCE

The upscale, retro-style boutique bowling venue offers more of doing Club Southern Pipe up at the pool, we’ve done it on the beach and made it a sports theme with volleyball and races in the sand and sandcastle building competitions. They have a great recreation staff that’s got more ideas than you can possibly use.”

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new, more moderately priced, family-friendly 1,800-room Cabana Bay Beach Resort will be completed in 2014.

For an overall meetings perspective of Orlando, Visit Orlando recently relaunched its meetings website (www.orlandomeeting.com) with the latest news on venues and attractions, plus accommodation listings, planning tools, online RFP submission forms and more. There’s also a link to Visit Orlando’s Twitter feed for industry updates and announcements.

More Orlando resort news of interest to groups:

Rosen Hotels and Resorts has renovation news to report for all three of their convention hotels, including the introduction of free wired and wireless Internet in all guest rooms and public areas. Rosen Centre Hotel (1,334 guest rooms; 124,000 sf of meeting space) recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of all guest rooms as well as the presidential and hospitality suites. Rosen Plaza Hotel (800 guest rooms; 60,000 sf of meeting space) recently completed a floor-to-ceiling renovation of all guest rooms as well as hallways and hospitality suites. Rosen Shingle Creek (1,500 guest rooms; 445,000 sf of meeting space) recently enhanced its 50,000 sf of outdoor meeting space with an additional 16,000 sf. There’s also a 40,000-sf outdoor event lot to take advantage of Florida’s great weather.

Rosen Shingle Creek last year opened Banrai Sushi and Tobias’ Flats & Watering Hole. Later this year Mi Casa Tequila Taqueria will open, the resort’s 15th dining/entertainment option.

The Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate just last month debuted the new $5,000-sf Osceola County Conference Center, which includes a 28,000-sf ballroom, open prefunction area and event lawn. With this new addition, the 720-room resort now offers more than 128,000 sf of indoor meeting space, including two ballrooms and 46 meeting rooms, and an additional 52,000 sf of outdoor event space.

Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek (400 guest rooms; more than 25,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting/event space), which opened in 2011, is offering several creative group activities to enhance teamwork and communications. For the “Krush!” activity, attendees are divided into teams that compete to create the perfect wine blend along with a name and logo for their new vintage. Wyndham Grand also can arrange an Iron Chef-style competition called the “Texas BBQ Briket Challenge” as well as “Mixology 101” where groups of 40 or fewer compete to create a signature cocktail for their event.

Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center (1,406 guest rooms; 400,000 sf of meeting space) unveiled a $50 million renovation last spring that included upgraded guest rooms, networking venues and executive meeting spaces. New are the 10,000-sf Coquina Lawn for hosting outdoor events, the Cypress Springs Family Fun Water Park, Wreckers Sports Bar and adults-only South Beach Pool.

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel (2,265 guest rooms; 329,000 sf of meeting space) rivals the Gaylord Palms for its ability to host supersized meetings. Meeting space includes 110,500 sf of contiguous convention/exhibit space and four ballrooms. Groups also have the option to use the expert services of Disney Event Productions.

The Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek (1,000 guest rooms; 122,000 sf of meeting space) borders Walt Disney World Resort and shares the adjacent Waldorf Astoria Orlando’s golf club and Guerlain spa.

Daytona Beach

A gem in Daytona Beach Shores is the luxury oceanfront Shores Resort & Spa (212 guest rooms; 20,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting/event space) the only AAA Four Diamond oceanfront resort in Central Florida. Meeting space encompasses oceanside executive boardrooms, a private beachfront terrace, grand ballroom and sky-level meeting space with panoramic views of the Atlantic Ocean and Intracoastal Waterway. Highlights for groups include oceanside fire pits, the boutique Indulge Spa, surfing lessons, fitness-led beach walks and more. The Shores is now offering free round-trip transfers to Oceanfront guest rooms (1,334 guest rooms; 60,000 sf of meeting space) recently completed a multi-year renovation that included upgraded guest rooms, networking venues and executive meeting spaces. New are the 10,000-sf Coquina Lawn for hosting outdoor events, the Cypress Springs Family Fun Water Park, Wreckers Sports Bar and adults-only South Beach Pool.

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South Florida

Jeff Nelke, vice president and general manager of Access Destination Services in Hollywood, FL, shared one idea that some of his hotel clients have embraced during the past year. “We’ve seen some of our corporate clients taking advantage of doing evening activities to replace what were traditionally dine-arounds,” he explains. “They’re able to share in the bonding experience and collaboration, since spending time together is a goal of a lot of these corporate clients. It’s a great way to take advantage of high-end audio-visual production for entertainment, let’s say for an evening gala. To bring that into on a dine-around budget. It’s certainly something that was different and well-received.”

He also noted a change in booking windows that he has seen recently. “We have definitely seen a pickup in activity, and planning is becoming more paramount. Over the last two years, it’s been easier to get the things that you want in terms of availability, and we’re starting to see things book up much quicker. We’re starting to say, ‘You’re coming in January, February or March?’ Great! Is that 2014 or ’15?’ Whereas in the past, you were able to go to two to three months out and find availability for the venues and things that you would like. We definitely see that as a trend. Before, it was easier for meeting planners to pull that rabbit out of their hat at the last minute because of availability. It’s going to require a little more planning as we go into the 2013-’14 season. You just can’t wait as long if you know what you want.”

When asked which offsite venues are the most popular in South Florida, Nelke replies, “We’ve seen the use of a lot of our Miami Beach nightclubs, particularly Mansion, Opium and Bamboo here on the beach. They are great facilities if you need to take advantage of some audio-visual production because it’s built in and the nightlife scene doesn’t really get going until 11 or 12 o’clock or midnight, so we’re able to use the facility. Our corporate dinner would usually be from 7 to 10 or 7 to 11. It’s a great way to take advantage of high-end audio-visual production for entertainment, let’s say for an evening gala. To bring that into

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Nestled half a mile from Miami’s most exclusive shopping and dining district, The Shores Resort & Spa today unveiled a $50 million resort transformation for guests to be in inspired. Rosen Shingle Creek is Orlando’s premier all-inclusive resort, home of the Brad Brewer Golf Academy, home of the Brad Brewer Golf Academy, home of the Brad Brewer Golf Academy.

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38

39
Lakeside Lawn, which overlooks a lake and the resort’s golf course, is undergoing a property-wide renovation. Miami’s Doral Golf Resort & Spa, home to the legendary Blue Monster venue, and the Palm Terrace restaurant is now available as a renovation that covers the resort’s guest rooms, and all four golf courses, has been established as a permanent special event venue. Group activities also can include chartered yacht dinners, events, eco-tours, and teambuilding programs such as cooking school, golf cart scavenger hunts, cardboard boat regattas and beach olympics to name a few. There also are plenty of options for events with a tropical backdrop, including the waterfront outdoor event venue Buccaneer Island.

One of the most significant developments in Miami’s meeting scene is Trump Hotel Collection’s purchase of the iconic Doral Golf Resort & Spa (700 guest rooms; 86,000 sf of meeting space) last summer. Through the fall of 2013, Trump will be investing more than $200 million in a property-wide renovation that covers the resort’s guest rooms, and all four golf courses including the legendary Blue Monster course. The renovation of its guest rooms last year. Despite the laidback clubs are old theaters that are converted into nightclubs. “They run the trend,” he continues. “Some are popular one year and out of business the next, so you have to make sure you’re working with good planners. As far as the facilities, you get a little bit of the vibe of the Miami Beach nightlife. When people come to South Florida, they think about the water, and the cosmopolitan culture, at least in South Beach. As you move up to Palm Beach, you have the rich history of the Flaglers, the Rockefeller, and the Kennedys, what they brought to the area. There are also the indigenous things like our Everglades, things of that nature. So (Booking a nightclub) touches on one of those major experiences.”

Nelke discussed why it’s important to strike a balance between planning events at the host hotel and going offsite. “We always feel that part of signing a good hotel contract is keeping them involved in the hotel for a couple of nights to help maximize room rates. But the last thing you want to do is spend every waking moment in the hotel. This is a great way to see the destination, as well, for the evening events.”

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Key Largo

One of Florida’s most prized enclaves is the private, exclusive Ocean Reef Club (guest accommodations include 175 inn rooms, 100 spacious one-, two- and three-bedroom villas, and private homes; 30,000 sf of meeting space), located in Key Largo, in the Upper Keys about an hour south of Miami International Airport. For 60 years, Ocean Reef Club has been a personal hideaway for titans of industry and other wealthy Americans who largely kept it a well-protected secret. Because of its VIP membership, privacy is paramount and security is suited to the world leaders who have vacationed or attended conferences there.

The complex, situated on 2,500 tropical acres, is a self-contained, member-owned property that features more than 7,500 waterfront acres, a 150-slip marina, a private airport, 54 holes of golf, a shopping village, tennis courts, salt water lagoon, beach, pools, Jacuzzi and more. Charters for flats and deep-sea fishing as well as snorkeling and scuba diving at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park are popular one-of-a-kind adventures. Group activities also include charter yacht dinners, beachside events, eco-tours, and teambuilding programs such as cooking school, golf cart scavenger hunts, cardboard boat regattas and beach olympics to name a few. There also are plenty of options for events with a tropical backdrop, including the waterfont outdoor event venue Buccaneer Island.

The 8,000-sf Spa at Ocean Reef just completed its own multimillion-dollar makeover in December. The renovation has added 10 individual massage and treatment rooms, plus a VIP couples suite. The new suite includes two treatment tables and an outdoor terrace with whirlpool and dining area.

40 February 2013 • Corporate & Incentive Travel • TheMeetingMagazines.com

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Louisiana is arguably one of the most unique destinations in the United States because of its matchless mix of cultural influences, music, cuisine, hotels and venues. The state is home to several increasingly popular destinations, including Baton Rouge and Shreveport-Bossier City. Last April, the 100 attendees at a telecommunication company’s incentive visited Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, a 38-acre antebellum jewel located about 60 miles outside of New Orleans. “We did a beautiful seated dinner on the front lawn at Houmas,” says David Rome, director of Sales, BBC Destination Management, a New Orleans DMC. “Ladies were decked out in antebellum dresses and men wore civil war uniforms of the North and South. We had one long table for everyone with one long tablecloth. There were several toasts of thanks to attendees. We had a full orchestra playing a mix of big band music during dinner and dance music afterwards. Everyone took a picture together in front of the plantation.”

The incentive group also enjoyed a dinner in New Orleans at Mardi Gras World, the leading maker of Mardi Gras floats, sculptures and props. “We picked them up from The Ritz-Carlton in a float, welcoming them with a band and had a parade in their honor,” says Rome. “They sat on floats with deejays playing and throwing beads to people on the roadside. When they arrived at the venue, they had a cocktail reception. We had extra lighting in the warehouse and glitter on the tables that picked up the lights from the floats and the tables. A band played zydeco music, and we had a seated catered dinner.”

New Orleans Mardi Gras World figured prominently in another group’s experiences in New Orleans, which remains Louisiana’s superstar destination. Automotive Events Inc. selected New Orleans for a recent three-day business conference for 1,200 Subaru dealers nationwide. During one evening the group held a themed party at Mardi Gras World, complete with floats, costumed figures, a jazz band and food stations featuring local cuisine.

On another evening, according to Iain Dobson, senior vice president of automotive events and manager of the Subaru account, the dealers witnessed the exciting debut of the Subaru BRZ at the recently opened NOLA Motorsports Park. Just 20 minutes from New Orleans, the race track, which offers road racing, go karts and drag racing, also sports impressive meeting and event facilities. “Usually when we do these introductions, we have a vehicle in a large room with drapes over it that we lift to reveal the vehicle. This time, we chose to use a race track,” Dobson says. “The track, coupled with a great meeting venue at the nearby Hyatt Regency New Orleans, and an entertaining and iconic city, all added up to a unique package that doesn’t occur anywhere else.”

The Big Easy is the heartbeat of Louisiana’s effervescent culture. New Orleans is known worldwide for its mélange of French, Spanish, English, African, Creole and Cajun cultures; jazz, Mardi Gras; and the French Quarter with its hundreds of restaurants, music venues and bars.

Seven years after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, New Orleans is attracting a growing number of visitors. The city received 4.9 million visitors in the first half of 2012, a 2 percent rise over the same period in 2011, according to the University of New Orleans Hospitality Research Center’s 2012 New Orleans Area Visitor Profile. Visitors spent $3.4 billion, up 11 percent over the first six months of 2011.

Nikki Moon, vice president of sales, New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, says New Orleans’ popularity is growing as a meeting designation. “Out of all our meetings, going into the future, anywhere from 50 to 80 percent, are smaller meetings,” says Moon, vice president of sales, New Orleans CVB. “We have a great package of hotel offerings, from big hotels and chain properties to wonderful independent hotels, and a citywide renovation program has been in effect in anticipation of the Super Bowl. Every single hotel has been refreshed, even after they were rebuilt following Katrina.”

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New Orleans’ singular culture makes it a big hit with corporate meetings. “We are very much a popular corporate meeting destination because we are so culturally endowed,” says Carling Dinkler, president, Custom Conventions, a New Orleans-based DMC that handles corporate meetings, incentives and conventions. “We are the most European city in the U.S. Corporate groups can come and have an exotic time without leaving the country.”

The plethora of cultural offerings in New Orleans allows planners to choose just the right activities to reach their meeting and incentive goals. “We weave New Orleans culture into the goals of corporate meetings and incentives, which is to get attendees excited about coming, and we have so many must-see and must-do things to get them excited,” says Dinkler.

An online encyclopedia company enjoyed a big helping of New Orleans culture during its three-day meeting at The Roosevelt New Orleans, a Waldorf Astoria Hotel, in January 2012. The 250 attendees enjoyed a French Quarter-themed dinner party in a warehouse that serves as a meeting venue. “We tricked out the warehouse with street lamps, street signs, tarot card readers, sketch artists and a mime to make it look like the French Quarter’s Jackson Square,” says Dinkler. “We had creole food and a jazz band. At the end of the night, we did a second-line parade in which the band comes down from the bandstand and a grand marshal leads everybody in a parade around the meeting space waving their handkerchiefs. It went over big,” he says. The group also held a dinner in a private dining room at world famous Antoine’s restaurant.

New Orleans offers so many alternatives that groups can have difficulty deciding what to do. That’s one reason why Dinkler sends sample activity programs to potential incentive and meeting clients. The sample programs include a wide range of popular activities. “We have the World War II Museum, the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas and Mississippi River cruises on the beautiful Steamboat Natchez,” says Dinkler.

The sample programs also include walking tours of New Orleans. Such tours are popular among corporate groups, Dinkler says, “The cool thing about New Orleans is that we do a lot of walking because everything is so close. Corporate groups love that. They also love it when we move them from the hotel to a venue with a second line parade or with carriages.”

Many distinctively Louisiana activities are available outside New Orleans. “They can go fishing in the morning and then have a cocktail party where we serve what they caught,” says Dinkler. “We also have scavenger hunts using seaplanes. Some groups go to venues in bayou country for a Cajun pig roast called a cochon du lait; or they can visit a Creole plantation.”

No matter what activities groups choose, there is one that is always at the top of the list — dining. Planners can choose from several world-famous New Orleans restaurants such as Antoine’s, Brennan’s, Muriel’s and Arnaud’s, all of which feature the culture of New Orleans lends itself to creativity and entertainment because it’s unlike any other city. It’s our job to make sure that the meetings and events are not only thought-provoking but extremely entertaining. If you are looking for that combination and you have the ability to choose the city you want, then New Orleans should be at the top of your list,” says Adler.

The Big Easy was at the top of the list for a media and entertainment company that held a strategy, networking and thought leadership meeting in the city in October around Halloween. The two-day meeting, which was the group’s first in New Orleans, included about 150 top executives. Attendees met at the 285-room Loews New Orleans Hotel, which offers 17,000 sf of meeting space. Adler and his staff brought in the famous Rebirth Brass Band for entertainment during sessions held in the hotel ballroom.

Outside of the hotel, the group gathered for dinner in Jackson Square at ever-popular Muriel’s restaurant, which serves some of the finest Creole cuisine in New Orleans. Attendees also visited Frenchman Street, home of a joyful enclave of jazz clubs, restaurants and bars. The group was wowed by the many revelers who took to Frenchman Street in wildly exotic costumes to celebrate Halloween, says Adler.

New Orleans offers so many alternatives that groups can have difficulty deciding what to do. That’s one reason why Dinkler sends sample activity programs to potential incentive and meeting clients. The sample programs include a wide range of popular activities. “We have the World War II Museum, the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas and Mississippi River cruises on the beautiful Steamboat Natchez,” says Dinkler.

The sample programs also include walking tours of New Orleans. Such tours are popular among corporate groups, Dinkler says, “The cool thing about New Orleans is that we do a lot of walking because everything is so close. Corporate groups love that. They also love it when we move them from the hotel to a venue with a second line parade or with carriages.”

Many distinctively Louisiana activities are available outside New Orleans. “They can go fishing in the morning and then have a cocktail party where we serve what they caught,” says Dinkler. “We also have scavenger hunts using seaplanes. Some groups go to venues in bayou country for a Cajun pig roast called a cochon du lait; or they can visit a Creole plantation.”

No matter what activities groups choose, there is one that is always at the top of the list — dining. Planners can choose from several world-famous New Orleans restaurants such as Antoine’s, Brennan’s, Muriel’s and Arnaud’s, all of which feature the world-class New Orleans cuisine, latest sound and lighting technology, integrated digital information systems, 34,000 hotel rooms, packaged any way you like. Contact the sales department at 504.582.3023, re-sg@mocon.com, or scan the QR code.
Once again, this year’s game attracted scores of corporations looking to entertain and reward employees, clients and business partners. During the game, corporations entertained in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome’s several renovated Club Lounge areas, each of which accommodates up to 500 people.

New and Noteworthy

The 1.1-million-sf New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center — the sixth largest convention center in the nation — opened The Great Hall in late January 2013. The $50 million project encompasses 86,000 sf of flexible function space, including the 60,300-sf, column-free Great Hall, the largest ballroom in New Orleans; 25,400 sf of multi-use prefunction space; a 4,660-sf junior ballroom with a 3,420-sf rooftop terrace called The Rivergate Room; a multipurpose lounge; and an open-hand-scaled pedestrian plaza. The Great Hall, named for the 1984 World’s Fair exhibit space of the same name, can be divided into multiple configurations, allowing for several concurrent but independent session rooms. The Great Hall debut follows $140 million of other post-Katrina upfits and renovations. For example, the Royal Sonesta Hotel New Orleans, built in 1799 to house the Spanish municipal government, features reception space on three floors and a court-yard overlooking the Mississippi River. Smaller groups may

24,000 sf of meeting space, completed a $10 million renovation that included updated guest rooms and meeting space, and the Criollo Restaurant and Lounge. In March, the hotel celebrated the grand reopening of its famous rotating Carousel Bar, which added a second, new stationary bar.

Following a $275 million redesign and revitalization, the Hyatt Regency New Orleans, featuring 1,193 all-new sophisticated guest rooms and suites and 200,000 sf of state-of-the-art, flexible event space, and expansive food and beverage offerings, reopened in 2011. The 32-story hotel — in the city’s downtown district and adjacent to the Mercedes-Benz Superdome — offers two 25,000-sf ballrooms, 64 versatile meeting and banquet rooms, 19 executive-level meeting rooms, seven permanent boardrooms, and more than 80,000 sf of exhibit space, highlighted by a new 50,000 sf exhibit hall. In addition to revitalizing its 1,193 guest rooms, including 95 suites, five meeting planner suites and four presidential suites, other highlights include 8 Block Kitchen & Bar, a 360-seat, full-service restaurant and bar; Vitascope Hall, a media/action bar outfitted with 42 flat-screen TVs; and Borgne, the latest restaurant by chef John Besh. Additional culinary options include a 65-seat Starbucks; Lagniappe Exchange, a 24-hour fresh market and convenience store; Whole Hog Café, featuring award-winning barbecue; and Pizza Consegna. “The re-opening of Hyatt Regency New Orleans is symbolic as it represents the end of a journey and the beginning of a new chapter for Hyatt and the city of New Orleans,” says Michael Smith, general manager. “We spared no detail in positioning ourselves to be the quintessential hotel for conventions, leisure and business travelers alike.”

New Orleans also is upgrading its transportation infrastructure. Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport is undergoing a $300 million modernization, including expansion of Concourse D and the addition of six new gates.

Unique venues are a New Orleans specialty. Examples include legendary Preservation Hall, which offers top jazz bands five nights a week and accommodates groups of up to 125 people. The Cabildo, built in 1799 to house the Spanish municipal government, features reception space on three floors and a courtyard overlooking the Mississippi River. Smaller groups may

2013 New Orleans Super Bowl Host Committee Co-Chairs

(And New Orleans locals), Mary Matalin and James Carville

For more information call 877-393-5828 or visit neworleansmeetings.com.

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“...As the brand of Baton Rouge becomes more familiar and recognized, we will do considerably better in meetings.”

Paul Arrigo, CDME, President and CEO

Visit Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge, LA

“We are coming off one of our banner years. There is one thing we agree on— New Orleans is a great place to hold an event!”

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enjoy The Musée Conti Wax Museum in the French Quarter, which accommodates groups of up to 200.

The National World War II Museum (formerly known as the National D-Day Museum), located in the Central Business District on Magazine Street, was designated by the U.S. Congress as “America’s National World War II Museum” in 2003. The museum is undergoing a $300 million expansion project — “The Road to Victory: A Vision for Future Generations” — which will eventually quadruple the size of the original museum.

The new 1,500-acre BioDistrict in downtown and mid-city New Orleans is home to a collection of biomedical research and development facilities, teaching facilities, clinics and hospitals. Completed projects include the BioInnovation Center and Louisiana Cancer Research Consortium. The U.S. Veterans Affairs Hospital, currently under construction, is scheduled to open in 2015; and the University Medical Center, also under construction, will open in 2014.

Baton Rouge

Located 80 miles from New Orleans, the popular city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana’s capital and most populous city, combines Creole culture, the charm of the Old South and urban style. Baton Rouge is a popular destination. “We are coming off one of our banner years. We had an increase in leisure travel,” says Paul Arrigo, CDME, president and CEO of Visit Baton Rouge, the city’s CVB. “Our hotel tax receipts from leisure travelers are up over 25 percent over the last year. As the brand of Baton Rouge becomes more familiar and recognized, we will do considerably better in meetings, a lot of which center around Louisiana State University (LSU) sports, particularly football, which attracts corporate groups,” he says.

Baton Rouge’s growing meetings infrastructure is a plus for potential meetings. In late 2011, the 256-room Renaissance Baton Rouge Hotel opened near the LSU campus. It was the first newly constructed full-service hotel to be built in Baton Rouge in about 40 years. The Renaissance provides 13,000 sf of meeting space, including a 7,500-sf ballroom.

Baton Rouge’s off-site venues reflect its Old South, Creole and modern influences. For example, the Magnolia Mound Plantation’s Hart House accommodates up 50 guests and its French Creole barn can host up to 250 people. The Old Governor’s Mansion offers a classic ballroom that provides an elegant setting for meetings. The LSU Museum of Art offers 14 galleries, including two that can accommodate 200 and 400 people, respectively.

Kerri Morgan, CMP, global account manager for Hotels for Hope, an Austin, TX, for-profit hotel booking company for planners and businesses that also matches clients’ contributions to selected charities, recently scheduled a three-day meeting in Baton Rouge for about 100 attendees of Professional Marketing International, a Lehi, UT-based real estate investment and online business consulting firm. The meeting, which involved intensive training courses, included about 24 room nights at various Baton Rouge hotels since most of the attendees live in the Baton Rouge area.

Morgan’s meetings are typically booked on a short turn-around of about four weeks prior to the meeting, and she often deals with groups that have people staying in several different hotels. That’s why Morgan finds CVBs such as Visit Baton Rouge to be very helpful. “We use them every time. They make sure that my RFPs get into the hands of the hotels on time. And they have all the connections to make sure we get sufficient bids from all the hotels we are considering. That’s very important for my clients. Plus they are experts on the city and a great resource for any additional information about the town,” says Morgan.

Shreveport-Bossier City

Shreveport and Bossier City, two municipalities located on opposite banks of the Red River, draw cultural influences from their locations in the northwest corner of Louisiana near the Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas borders. The slogan of the Shreveport-Bossier Convention & Tourist Bureau (SBCTB) is “Louisiana’s Other Side.” The SBCTB’s website describes the area as “East Texas Cowboy with a Cajun Twist,” and suggests that “It’s that unique combination of two great American heritages that sets Shreveport-Bossier apart.”

Groups of 10 or more visiting Shreveport-Bossier may arrange a private Mardi Gras party on the parade route. The party includes food, band, specialty bead and T-shirts all under a covered, climate-controlled tent.

Aside from its singular culture, Shreveport-Bossier City offers approximately 10,000 hotel rooms and the second largest convention center in Louisiana — Shreveport Convention Center (SCC). The facility features more than $50,000 sf of meeting space including a 95,000 sf, column-free main exhibit hall, 15,000 sf of meeting rooms and the 18,000-sf Capt. Shreve Ballroom. The SCC is connected to the 313-room Hilton Shreveport Hotel. In addition, the Bossier Civic Center (BCC) provides 24,000 sf of meeting and exhibit space with an additional 7,500-sf banquet hall that can be divided into three breakout rooms.

Groups can enjoy the local sights and taste delicious Southern specialties at any number of restaurants in Baton Rouge.

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The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, CO, has appointed Nicole Northrop-Jost as director of national sales. She formerly served as senior sales manager of the Four Seasons Resort & Club Dallas at Las Colinas in Irving, TX.

Sean Sachs has been appointed vice president of sales and marketing for all of The Dawson Companies, which includes The Scottsdale Plaza Resort, Scottsdale, AZ. He previously was associate director of sales at The Scottsdale Plaza Resort.

Dolce Hotels and Resorts has appointed James Bennett to vice president of sales, North America. He was with Starwood Hotels & Resorts in New York where he served as the leader in the New York City metro market.

James M. Gelfand was named director of sales and marketing for The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa, Tucson, AZ. He was director of sales and marketing at Turnberry Isle Miami, Miami, FL, and The Westin Copley Place in Boston, MA.

Cranwell Resort, Spa and Golf Club, Lenox, MA, has named Tim Paulus as director of sales. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing at The Westin Poinsett Hotel in Greenville, SC.

Loews Hotels & Resorts has appointed Stephanie Hinckley to vice president of sales and marketing for the company’s Western division. She formerly served as director of sales and marketing at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix, AZ.
Sometimes the best breakout rooms aren’t rooms at all.

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