Budgets Are Coming Back

Budgets are coming back. New stories of success emerge every day as more and more meeting professionals are working with budgets that are comparable to pre-recession budgets. What’s more, headlines trumpet record-breaking attendance figures for industry events, tourism visitation and more. That’s good news all around, especially for those segments of group business that were stuck close to home for meetings and incentives. Even so, value trumps all as planners are still challenged to do more with less.

According to Jo Kling, president of Miami, Florida-based cruise event and ship charter specialist Landry & Kling Inc., cruising’s value and the improved economy have spurred an uptick in corporate cruise budgets. In our cover story this month “Meeting at Sea — New Experiences, New Value on Deck,” Kling affirms that budgets are back. “There is a regeneration of the classic incentive business the cruise world has always enjoyed so much. That is exciting for planners who are doing what they did on cruises during the days before the economic downturn,” says Kling.

Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, a candle warmer and fragrance company, arranges events at sea due to the value, the budget-friendly, all-inclusive pricing and the abundant variety of built-in dining and entertaining options — not to mention the recreational opportunities on shore. Gale once hosted 300 attendees on a seven-night cruise to Alaska aboard a Celebrity Solstice-class vessel. “At the ports, you can do almost anything within a 20- to 30-minute drive — off-road jeep tours, dog sledding, sea planes or walking on glaciers,” says Gale who selected Alaska because of its bucket-list appeal.

Cruise meeting trends include longer group cruises says Shari Wallack, president of Buy the Sea, a Plantation, Florida-based, all-inclusive resort brokerage company. “There is a willingness to book seven-night cruises in order to experience something on the ship that they have never experienced before,” says Wallack. “It’s a way to get away for seven nights, cut down on travel times and don’t have to worry about the drive and traffic. It’s really a new way to look at the incentive business.”

Another hot trend is new and exciting restaurants says Wallack. Add improved food, service, and exciting amenities to the mix, and you have what Eldon Gale fittingly describes: “A cruise ship can be a city by itself with everything you need on board... everything you need to do when you dock at ports.”

To learn why meetings in Music City rock, check out what the new Nashville has to offer. New roadmaps have been created to encourage, excite and encourage... enjoy... the city. Check out the highlights of the new Nashville on page 44, and to discover how meeting in sunny Florida motivates and inspires your attendees, check out how the Sunshine State delivers time...
New Florida Gulf Coast Luxury Resort to Open in 2016

DESTIN, FL — Dunavant Enterprises Inc. has revealed the plan and timeline for the new multiphase Henderson Beach Resort in Destin, Florida. Dunavant has selected Salamander Hotels & Resorts to assist with the development and management of the 171-room anchor hotel of the new Henderson Beach Resort destination. The Henderson, a Salamander Beach & Spa Resort will feature 171 guest rooms with views of the Gulf of Mexico.

“There are tremendous synergies between our three existing Florida resorts and The Henderson, and our experience of developing and operating iconic destination resorts will ensure that this property is properly positioned within the luxury market,” said Sheila C. Johnson, founder and CEO of Salamander Hotels & Resorts. “It has been our pleasure getting to know the Dunavant team over the past few years, and we look forward to creating a resort hospitality environment befitting of its stunning setting.”

The Henderson will feature 10,000 sf of indoor event space, including a dedicated meeting wing, a 5,400 sf ballroom, a junior ballroom, private boardrooms, and nearly 30,000 sf of outdoor group options, including oceanfront function locations. www.thehenderson.com, www.salamanderhotels.com.

Wyndham Hotel Group Acquires Dolce Hotels and Resorts

PARSIPPANY, NJ — Wyndham Hotel Group has acquired Dolce Hotels and Resorts, a portfolio of 24 properties and more than 5,500 guest rooms. “Dolce is a terrific strategic fit for us,” said Geoff Ballotti, president and CEO, Wyndham Hotel Group. “With three decades of established brand equity, Dolce is a respected lead-er in the group space with outstanding destination properties and some of the best meeting product offerings available in the market today. In addition, Dolce has a long, successful history of award-winning innovation in conference planning and management. We look forward to continuing the growth of the Dolce brand and leveraging these Dolce attributes across the Wyndham global system while enhancing the Dolce owner and guest experience.”

Many of the Dolce properties are certified by the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC). Dolce pioneered the Complete Meetings Package, a concept designed to address all of the elements planners need when arranging meetings. www.wyndhamworldwide.com.

IRF Unveils Vision2020

ST. LOUIS, MO — The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) recently launched its Vision2020 initiative. The IRF’s Vision2020 is a blueprint for the future, ensuring that the IRF will continue to lead the global incentive and recognition industry with actionable research and education by focusing on unification, universal tools and university alliances.

“In 2010, the IRF charted a new course by broadening its research footprint and expanding educational efforts led by the appointment of Melissa Van Dyke as president,” said Sandra Daniel, new chair of the IRF 2015 board of trustees. “Now with Vision2020, we are well-positioned to take our unique role in the recognition and rewards industry to the next level!”

The three pillars of IRF’s Vision2020 are:
• Unification: To cultivate community and collaboration in the global incentive and recognition industry.
• Universal Resources: To amplify the use of IRF research and education in all business disciplines.
• University Alliances: To increase the incentive and recognition research both produced and used by academia and business.

The IRF will expand its current, infrastructure, partner-ship and research networks; launch a new website; transition to Coutlier Nonprofit Management in July 2015; and accredit IRF education in 2016. www.therif.org.

U.S. Business Travel Spending to Top $310 Billion in 2015

ALEXANDRIA, VA — U.S. business travel spending in 2014 hit a high note, with record spending expected to reach $292.2 billion. The projection for 2015 also remains strong, as lower oil prices are expected to increase consumer spending, boosting economic projects. This strong domestic economic news comes despite an overall weak global economic outlook, with trouble in Europe, Asia and Russia.

Overall, U.S. business travel spend- ing is expected to advance 6.2 per-cent to $310.2 billion in 2015, while total person-trip volume is expected to increase 1.7 percent to 490.4 million trips for the year, according to the GBTA BTI Outlook — United States 2014 Q4, a report from the GBTA Foundation, the education and research arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), and sponsored by Visa Inc. “2014 was a stabilizing year for U.S. business travel, with continuous, sustained growth; despite a plethora of external issues internationally that have weighed down earnings in Europe, Russia and Asia,” said Michael W. McCormick, GBTA executive direc-tor and COO. “This is a significant and encouraging sign of confidence in the strength of the U.S. economy.”

Group trip volume will likely finish down 2.2 percent year-over-year, stab-ilizing after extraordinary growth in 2013. Group spend-per-trip, however, is on pace to rise to $715 in 2014, up from $680 in 2013. Both volume and spending are expected to rise in 2015 by 1.5 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively.

The GBTA BTI Outlook — United States report is available exclusively to GBTA members. Others may purchase the report by emailing priscilla@gtafoundation.org. www.gbta.org, www.gbta.org/foundation.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises Introduces Seven Seas Explorer

NEW YORK, NY — Boosting the highest-est space ratio in the cruise industry, the all-suite, all-balcony Seven Seas Explorer will carry just 750 guests and will be designed to be the most luxur-i-ous ship ever built.

“We set a high benchmark for Seven Seas Explorer, not only to build a ship that far surpasses the current standard in luxury cruising, but to design a ship that will be recognized industry-wide as the most luxurious ship ever,” said Jason Montague, Regent Seven Seas Cruises president and COO. “We cannot wait to share this ship with the world when she joins our fleet in the sum-mer of 2016.”

Regent Seven Seas Cruises will introduce a new category of luxury suite exclusively for Seven Seas Explorer. Also, the ship’s primary showplace, the two-tiered, 694-seat Constellation Theater, will pay homage to the glamour of Hollywood’s golden age. In addition, the Observation Lounge brings to life the opulence of the Roaring Twenties, and the Explorer Lounge provides a country club vibe. On one side of the lounge, live musical performances will take place.

The maiden voyage for Seven Seas Explorer will be a 14-night sailing from Monte Carlo to Venice on July 20, 2016. Reservations for Seven Seas Explorer’s inaugural season open February 4, 2015. www.rssc.com/seven-seas-explorer.

Seattle’s Growth Continues With Luxury Hotel at Southport

SEATTLE, WA — SECO Development Inc. announced plans to design and build the Hotel at Southport, a four-star, 350-room luxury hotel serving the needs of one of America’s fastest growing cities. The 12-story Hotel at Southport is lo-cated on Lake Washington, and is the third of four phases. The already developed SECO Southport, an 80-unit luxury residential building and 73,800 sf of commercial space is 95 percent occupied. The Hotel at Southport will offer 40,000 sf of conference center, VIP lounge and gourmet restaurant, retail, 20,000 sf of waterfront courtyards and plazas, and four rooftop terraces. An EB-5 partially funded project, the Hotel at Southport is on line for LEED designation in building design and construction by the U.S. Green Building Council. www.secoedw.com.
New Carnival Vista Will Feature High-Altitude Sky Ride and World’s First Imax Theatre at Sea

MIA M., FL — Carnival Cruise Line recently announced in New York the details of its most innovative ship ever, Carnival Vista, debuting in spring 2016. Designed to connect guests to the ocean with sweeping views and plenty to do both outdoors and in, Carnival Vista will take cruising to new heights and introduce an exciting array of new features including SkyRide, a suspended, open-air cycling experience; the world’s first Imax Theatre on a ship, an expanded water park featuring the colorful Kaleid-O-Slide, the line’s first raft-riding water tube slide; Seafood Shack, a New England-inspired eatery; RedFrog Pub, including the line’s first onboard brewery and other enhanced dining, bar and entertainment options; as well as new scenic and family-friendly accommodation types. The ship’s inaugural Mediterranean itineraries will mark the line’s return to Europe. The largest ship in the fleet, Carnival Vista will measure 133,500 tons, 1,055 feet long and have a guest capacity of 3,936 (based on two per cabin). The new vessel will debut May 1, 2016, with a 13-day cruise departing from Trieste, Italy — the first European voyage for Carnival in three years. A variety of Mediterranean itineraries will be offered as well as several new destinations such as Crete (Heraklion), and Corfu, Greece; Valetta, Malta; Palermo, Sicily; Cagliari, Sardinia; and Gibraltar. On October 21, 2016, Carnival Vista will embark on a special 13-day transatlantic crossing and arrive in New York November 3, 2016, then operate a series of voyages from the Big Apple.

Discover The Palm Beaches Reports Positive Tourism Trends

PALM BEACH COUNTY, FL — Discover The Palm Beaches recently released the year-end hotel performance dashboard for 2014, revealing positive tourism trends in occupancy, average daily rate (ADR) and revenue per available room (RevPAR) over 2013. Overall, Palm Beach County experienced a 9.5 percent increase in RevPAR at $114 compared to $104 in 2013, resulting in 59 consecutive months of RevPAR growth. The county closed out the year with an ADR of $156, which places Palm Beach County third in the state with an ADR of $156, which places

Tourism continues to be the No. 1 industry in the county, with 1,042 hotel rooms in construction and another 1,400 in the planning pipeline.

“By combining our well-timed marketing efforts, our new brand as Discover The Palm Beaches, and a major uptick in the tourism projects in the pipeline, we are confident that tourism will continue to see increases across the board in the coming years,” said Jorge Pesquera, president and CEO of Discover The Palm Beaches. “We look forward to continuing to develop relationships with our partners, and collaborating with other TDC agencies as well as the local community to further promote this area as an ideal destination for visitors, meetings, new residents and businesses.”

Discover The Palm Beaches aims to attract 400,000 more visitors totaling approximately 6.6 million visitors in 2015, $7.5 billion in total economic impact and 6,000 new tourism jobs through 2015. www.palmbeachfl.com

Snapshots
Taking Your ‘Show’ on the Road? 11 Keys to a Successful Multilocation Event

Taking your "show" on the road can be a fantastic way to communicate your message, engage your audience, get real-time feedback, conduct interactive training or put your product right into the hands of your very best prospects. It also can be a time-consuming, logistical nightmare that can drain your budget without generating the results you need. Making sure your multilocation event or road show meets your objectives requires careful thought, extensive and highly detailed planning, tremendous flexibility, creative thinking and access to a broad network of subcontractors and suppliers. If you’ve never done a multilocation event before, it can be hard to grasp how complex they can be. In almost all cases, your best strategy is to hire an experienced event planning agency to help you. Their first-hand knowledge and extensive network of technology, logistics, transportation, hotel, facility and destination partners will be invaluable.

Whether you decide to take your show on the road yourself or work with an agency, here are 11 insights from BI Worldwide, an industry leader in event planning, to keep in mind to make sure your show goes on!

1. Analyze your objectives to determine if a multilocation road show is the best fit for you. Road shows are a good way to create more face time and close interaction with your audience. They are excellent when you need to do hands-on training or get prospects to test-drive your products. Road shows can give regional management a chance to personalize their local messages. They can mean less travel time/out-of-office time for attendees and offer attendees flexibility to choose dates and locations that meet their schedules.

2. Plan MUCH further ahead than you normally would. The engagement benefits are outstanding with smaller audiences, but they come with two critical caveats: time and money. While smaller, out-of-the-way locations can be less costly than large convention centers or full-service hotels, they may not be able to provide the support services you will need to demonstrate product, make and maintain high-speed technology connections, provide suitable food and beverage service, have enough or the right kind of hotel rooms, or give you access to subcontractors for drayage, set construction and tear down and other specialized needs. If participants need to fly to your event, larger airports provide more frequent service and often offer better airfares.

3. Define your event needs before setting the schedule and selecting venues. Outline your event content ASAP as it will determine the types of venues you need, technology required, setup and tear-down time, and travel time between events. It’s simply not possible to have hands-on demos of heavy-duty equipment in many hotel parking lots, often due to zoning ordinances. And, no matter what the weather, you can’t get two semi-trailer trucks of demonstration equipment from Denver to Baltimore in 16 hours.

4. Evaluate your event sites carefully. Suitability has to take precedence over price. The venues must be able to accommodate your needs and be convenient for your participants to access. While smaller, out-of-the-way locations can be less costly than larger convention centers or full-service hotels, they may not be able to provide the support services you will need to demonstrate product, make and maintain high-speed technology connections, provide suitable food and beverage service, have enough or the right kind of hotel rooms, or give you access to subcontractors for drayage, set construction and tear down and other specialized needs. If participants need to fly to your event, larger airports provide more frequent service and often offer better airfares.

5. Visit calendars before picking the event dates based on your audience profile. Industry trade shows, holidays and school schedules can impact whether participants choose to attend. For example, if your industry traditionally has a major trade show in early October that your desired participants attend, you’ll want to avoid scheduling too close to those dates.

6. Communicate clearly, frequently and use a wide range of media. Publish your event calendar or issue invitations as soon as your dates and locations are confirmed. Be clear about registration deadlines and your policies for switching dates or attending locations outside of the participant’s region. Use all types of media: print (via USPS), email, social media, text messaging and voice calls. Send reminders and request a response. You want to make sure that you aren’t holding spots for people who won’t attend while turning down registration requests from others due to lack of space.

7. Put your brand front and center. Your brand is more than your logo; it’s your organization’s personality. At every turn, consider ways to infuse each touchpoint with the intangible factors that differentiate your brand (tone, values, beliefs, etc.). When vetting creative partners, make sure that candidates have extensive experience utilizing brand identities to unify all aspects of execution, from graphic and/or scenic design to written copy to interactive elements. By creating an inviting, cohesive, personal experience for your audience, you have an opportunity to clearly and holistically distinguish yourself from the competition in an emotionally compelling way.

8. Make the experience fun and memorable. No doubt, you have a clear objective for putting on a road show, but you also need to view the event through the eyes of your attendees. Give them a reason to stay involved by wrapping your subject matter into something that will immerse them into your brand AND be enjoyable. Attendees who have fun will most certainly appreciate your efforts, but more important, they will reach a deeper level of engagement! Offering an entertaining experience will come back to you twofold: You’ll get immediate results via increased engagement, and your attendees will be eager to attend future events.

9. Make technology your partner. Whenever possible, give participants the ability to download materials onto their phones, tablets or laptops or access the material digitally when they return to their offices. Invite them to participate digitally and share their experience with friends and colleagues via relevant social media platforms. Consider creative ways to incentivize digital engagement through giveaways, recognition and/or competition.

10. Staff up. You will need more staff for a multilocation event. Everything will take longer as you need to set up and tear down at every location. You may need bigger advance teams based on the complexity of your event. You may even need to have “two of everything” so one show can be moving and setting up while another is operating.

11. Evaluate and adapt as you go. Define clear goals and create tools to measure the success of those goals at each and every location. Ongoing feedback gives you the ability to make needed changes before the next location. This keeps you from dealing with the same challenges at every event.

The opportunity to maximize audience engagement is a strong reason to use a multilocation strategy to communicate your message and achieve positive results. Making sure you have the time to plan and having the budget resources to execute well are the keys to your success. Doing it yourself is possible, but working with an experienced event planning agency will likely save you from making costly mistakes that can mean the difference between a blockbuster road show and a tedious over-the-road trip to nowhere.

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If you’ve never done a multilocation event before, it can be hard to grasp how complex they can be.
Getting Your Act Together
Receive rave review—whether you’re going for broke or booking on a budget

By Sara Churchville

Planning the entertainment for a corporate meeting is wonderfully simple: Decide on a well-known performer, pay the performer and wait for the accolades to roll in. Right? Not even close, says Jim Schultzze, CMP, director of events for Chicago-based marketing and coaching consultant GKIC-Glazer-Kennedy Insider’s Circle.

“Planners and event sponsors often have blinders on when it comes to big names,” he says. “Everyone wants the name as a draw, but the budget often isn’t there for the performer.” And it isn’t just the performer’s fees, though those can be pretty extravagant: Jimmy Buffett, for example, commands $1 million per performance. With a marquee name, a planner also has to budget at least 50 percent more for production costs such as lighting, and food and beverage riders.

Schultzze booked a famous R&B group for a corporate event and remembers, “The food cost for Kool and the Gang — just the food cost — was $10,000 for their 300-person entourage.” Other knotty issues can crop up, too. In just one recent session, “the client’s committee suggested as possible performers Queen, Marvin Gaye and one other performer who had died.”

Going for Broke

For intrepid planners who do decide to go for a big name, Schultzze recommends creating a memorable experience by focusing on and negotiating for crowd interaction. Sometimes the interaction can be spontaneous, as during an event where he booked Huey Lewis and the News.

“Looking down into the crowd, Huey sees an attendee on the phone,” Schultzze remembers. “When he says he’s talking to his wife, Huey asks if she’s a fan. Oh, a huge fan! So Huey reaches out and grabs the guy’s phone, then tells the wife he’s performing right now but she and her husband can come as his guests to the next show and have some signed merchandise. Then he said goodbye, hung up, and told everyone to put their cell phones away. ‘I am only making that offer one time,’ he laughed. The crowd loved it.”

Schultzze advises planners to negotiate riders carefully and contract up front exactly how much and what type of interaction to have with attendees, especially VIPs, and to use their own connections to sweeten the pot with more than money. For example, Schultzze once secured time on the links for avid golf fan Kenny Loggins in exchange for extra time appearing in photos with attendees.

“Do a big show with a big band one year; next year do an unplugged performance; next year do a comedian, juggle plates or chain saws, a variety show — so people remember your events in terms of the year they happened. Changing it up is a big deal,” he says.

Running for Cover

Schultzze says he’s noticed a trend of moving away from headliners and toward entertainment that is more intimate, cheaper, more unexpected or some combination of the three.

“Actions like the Neil Diamond cover band ‘Thunder and Lightning, for example, are ‘plug and play’. Not only do they come minus the overhead and diva drama of a marquee name, but they also tend to get ‘the place jumping and interact well with the crowd,’” Schultzze says.

He advises planners who are thinking of booking acts on a budget to “develop parameters as opposed to focusing on names — here’s the kind of person we want, not we want this person — so you don’t have blinders on. It gives you flexibility on availability and price.”

Remote Control

Another way to save a bit is to engage entertainers who perform remotely. For one of Schultzze’s events, Ivan and Jaron, who sing “Crazy for This Girl,” performed in an hour-long live webcast from their studio for $1,000 vs. the $40,000 plus production plus travel it would have cost had they been onsite.

“Planners and event sponsors often have blinders on when it comes to big names. Everyone wants the name as a draw, but the budget often isn’t there for the performer.”

Jim Schultzze, CMP, Director of Events, GKIC-Glazer-Kennedy Insider’s Circle, Chicago, IL

Bay Fireworks, which specializes in special effects displays for events, produced this fireworks waterfall backdrop to a high-octane Katy Perry performance for veterans.

Credits: AlliedPRA, New York
Jenkins’ best advice for planners is to think fast. “I would be the presenter the following Monday, and that needs humor that is not external to but an outgrowth of the way they do things.”

The themes hit home with attendees because Fiala has researched the ins and outs of the company beforehand, talking to managers and salespeople, learning which issues will resonate. He can use Willie or another character to “acknowledge corporate issues of employees or customers or sales teams and helps to defuse the issues. People really want to be able to have a good time at a meeting, and that means humor that is not external to but an outgrowth of the way they do things.”

**Bespoke Events**

Michelle Crosby, CMP, CTA, DMCP, national sales manager for destination management company AlliedPRA’s Dallas/Fort Worth office in Grapevine, Texas, finds that what attendees want from destination meetings is an individualized experience — “nothing kitschy or standard,” she says. Attendees want an experience they couldn’t orchestrate on their own. For example, in the DFW region, that means instead of visiting the usual tourist spots such as the JFK memorial, hold a chill cook off at Southfork Ranch, home of the “Dallas” TV show. Instead of visiting the presidential library or a museum, Crosby suggests holding an event there.

Clients want to “live like a local,” and since Dallas is a big foodie region, culinary events often top the list of local delights. Her clients have, for example, held events featuring local celebrity chefs such as Stephan Pyles and Kent Rathbun. Planners can, depending on the budget, buy out half or even the entire restaurant so the chef can mingle with attendees, sign cookbooks or offer cooking demos.

They think it’s an inside job,” he says. “And in a sense, that’s exactly what it is. We leverage their time by letting DMCs and deal with corporate clients (document-management company AlliedPRA) and the city’s own visual building, especially since attendees can spend some time in separate out, then meet later to discuss their respective days.

Because the area has a lot of culinary schools, there are plenty of opportunities to eat well and to help at-risk children start out in the restaurant business. She’s steered planners to work with Trinity Grooves, for example, a restaurant incubator program that offers grants to would-be restaurateurs.

**Giving Back**

Patrick Sullivan, president of AlliedPRA, New York, similarly finds giving back to the community to be a draw for corporate meetings. His clients have worked with Art Start, a collective of artists who offer children living in homeless shelters the space and education to blossom into artists and musicians.

“Maybe because groups are getting younger, experiences that happen in front of your face have become very popular,” Sullivan says. “Seemingly retro things such as illusions who pull a rabbit out of a hat, acrobats, live wire acts or uniquely weird entertainers such as The Experimentalist — part entertainer, part mind reader — have worked well with groups.

Hiring the cast from Illuminate, a glow-in-the-dark dance troupe made famous from their appearance on “American’s Got Talent,” typically also makes a big impression on attendees. And in New York, planners also can tap into the talent of the region by hiring Juilliard students to perform, for example, as a jazz or classical ensemble; create a Broadway revue; or form a marching band that spells out the organizers’ name.

Planners can use the city’s own vibrancy and even its civil servants in their quest to entertain. Sullivan has organized city tours with entertainment specially planned for the group at each spot — a singer here, a magician there, someone set up at a three-card monte table at a third spot, costumed carolers at a fourth — so the city seems to have sprung up for the day especially to entertain the group.

At one meeting, an event space was set up like a New York City subway, complete with break dancers, subway seats and spray paint cans so attendees could create their own graffiti. For other meetings, actual graffiti artists can tag a reception area with a company’s logo. Even local firemen and policewomen can be hired to entertain to raise funds for a local charity.

The moral of the story? No matter the form entertainment takes, it’s the level of attendee engagement and the memories made that count.
More and more meeting planners are embracing the idea of conducting meetings and incentives at sea as they become aware of the substantial rewards: incomparable value, an ever-expanding variety and range of amenities and activities, and most of all the often exotic and exceedingly memorable experience.

These attractive advantages are just what the doctor ordered for Eldon Gale’s groups. As the director of events for Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based candle warmer and fragrance company, Gale is eagerly gearing up for his next cruise in June — the third in the last 18 months.

Gale is arranging a seven-night Royal Caribbean cruise for 900 salespeople that kicks off from San Juan, Puerto Rico and includes such ports of call as St. John and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands; Philipsburg, St. Maarten; Antigua; St. Lucia and Barbados.

Gale left no stone unturned in planning the cruise. “I’m going down to San Juan and sail the trip beforehand to experience everything and know what to anticipate,” he says. “I’ve never seen the ports of call. I need to know what to expect when we get there. How long is the walk from the pier into the city? Are there things in the city they shouldn’t miss or things they should avoid? I need to know so I can tell attendees and executives so they can have a great experience.”

Gale paid the same attention to detail in planning two previous cruises, and he visited ports of call in advance. Last year, he took a group of 1,000 salespeople on a seven-night Royal Caribbean cruise to ports of call in Mexico, Jamaica and Haiti. Gale’s group needs certain types of meeting spaces, and the ship’s theater was ideal for one event. “We met there for a few hours for recognition awards,” says Gale. “The space worked fine. Royal Caribbean makes it a point to have meeting space.”

Previously, Gale took 300 salespeople on a seven-night cruise to Alaska aboard a Celebrity Solstice-class vessel. The ship sailed from Seattle and stopped in Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway and Victoria, British Columbia. “At the ports, you can do almost anything within a 20- to 30-minute drive — off-road jeep tours, dog sledding, sea planes or walking on glaciers,” says Gale. “We gave them cruise credits to use any way they wanted.”

Why Alaska? “It was on a lot of our people’s bucket list,” says Gale. “Cruising is a good way to see Alaska because it’s so big. The group loved it. But Alaska’s weather is tricky. You have to be educated about what you are getting into and prepared for any weather scenario.”
**The Value Proposition**

Gale is among droves of meeting pros who are regularly rotating cruises into their incentive travel program mix. Why? “The incredible value is a major factor,” says Gale. The value of cruising is boosted by all-inclusive programs that often cost comparatively less than land-based programs. “The value proposition is a major thing,” says Jo Kling, president of Landry & Kling Inc. “There are up to six brands in the cruise industry that are all-inclusive. You don’t have all of the miscellaneous after-bills that show up with a hotel. It’s much more manageable.”

Most all-inclusive packages include meals, meeting space and venues, cabins, activities, AV equipment, shows and entertainment as well as taxes and tips. “Cruises are regimented and programmed about what they do. It can be frustrating to get them to bend as you are accustomed to doing with land programs,” says Gale. “But the cruise companies are changing. And if you work with the right people, the business the cruise world has always enjoyed so much. That is exciting for planners who are doing what they did on cruises during the days before the economic downturn.”

Cruise incentives and meetings typically have a lower per-guest cost than land-based events. According to cruise industry experts, cruises save 20 percent to 30 percent on a package of meals, entertainment, meeting space, presentation equipment and sleeping rooms. In addition, cruise contracts typically contain less restrictive cancellation fees and attrition clauses.

Daniel J. Young, CMP, the director of event planning and recognition for Minneapolis-based Thrive!, raves about the lower per-person cost of cruising. “The average per person cost for our Mediterranean cruise for 270 people was $6,500 per person for everything, including airfare,” he says. “The next year we had a land program in Ireland that was close to $9,500 per person. Our cruise to Alaska was $5,700 per person, and Mexico was $4,700.”

Young cites several reasons why cruising is such a boon for planners and attendees. “They are easier and less time-consuming for planners to run. You don’t deal with a lot of food and beverage or meeting or incentive,” he says. “We wouldn’t cruise every year because we want people to see other locations. But we add the cruise option about every three years.”

**Full-charter Options**

Young started rotating cruises as an incentive reward in 2008. “It was the Mediterranean cruise on the 125-cabin SilverSea’s Silver Cloud,” he says. “It was seven nights, a full-charter buyout. It is a major thing,” says Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based candle warmer and fragrance company. “You can’t go into a cruise thinking it’s going to be similar to a land program. If you are stuck into making it like a land experience, you will be disappointed.”

**Pointers for First-timers**

Planning a cruise meeting is especially challenging for planners who have never done it. “A lot of planners don’t fully appreciate the differences and subtleties involved in planning a cruise meeting,” says Eldon Gale, director of events for Scentsy, a Meridian, Idaho-based candle warmer and fragrance company. “You can’t go into a cruise thinking it’s going to be similar to a land program. If you are stuck into making it like a land experience, you will be disappointed.”

Here are some tips from experienced planners and cruise experts.

**Consider working with a cruise broker.** “Planning a cruise is more complicated than its land-based counterpart because there are so many cruise lines, packages, sizes and types of ships and itineraries,” says Gale. “It’s helpful to work through cruise brokers because they do it day-in and day-out.”

**Determine the size and types of function space needed and consider ships that meet the meeting’s requirements.** Keep in mind that ships have smaller meeting rooms, conference spaces and other venues, Wallack advises. Inquire about the flexibility and types of setups available in venues and dining facilities.

**Match the size and type of ship with the group.** Ships range in size from vessels that accommodate a few hundred people to those that hold thousands. Budget and the type of group will determine the type of ship, length of the cruise, destinations and whether it’s best to buy out all or part of a vessel.

**Mind the details.** For example, the quality of cruise ship food can vary. Cabin sizes, even luxury quarters, run the gamut depending on the cruise line and the ship’s age. The lengths of time ships spend at sea between stops and how long they spend in port can differ. Ask questions about such details.

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- **Classic Beverage Package for Two** offers two guests per stateroom and includes beer up to $5 per serving, spirits, cocktails, and wines up to $15 per serving, all soda selections, fresh squeezed and bottled juices, premium coffees and teas; non-premium bottled water; and server gratuities (amount based on gratuity guidelines). Premium Beverage Packages upgrade available for an additional charge of $115 per person, per day, which includes gratuities, by contacting Celebrity Cruises. Free Gratuities for Two offers two guests per stateroom and includes server gratuities. Onboard Credit (“OBC”) includes up to $300 per stateroom (value is applicable to cruises only, non-transferable, not redeemable for cash, and will expire if not used by 10:00 PM on the final night of the cruise. To apply these offers, all orders must come through the Corporate Cruise Desk at 800-722-5934. Options all. All offers are non-transferable and applicable only to the Offer Cruise. Offers exclude interior staterooms. No refunds or credits for unused options. Offers are subject to availability and change without notice, and are capacity controlled. Offers not applicable to charters. Single occupancy bookings eligible for Offers. Refer to Cruise Ticket Contract for additional terms and conditions. ©2015 Celebrity Cruises Inc. Ships: registry: Malta and Ecuador.
“There are up to six brands in the cruise industry that are all-inclusive. You don’t have all of the miscellaneous after-bills that show up with a hotel. It’s much more manageable.”

Jo Kling, President
Landry & Kling Inc., Miami, FL

The spacious conference center on one of the Oasis class ships of Royal Caribbean International. The Oceania Riviera, a luxury cruise ship for 1,250 guests, is known for its impressive cooking school, which doubles as a great teambuilding program for groups.

islands in 2018.

was the first incentive we ever did that scored a perfect five out of five in attendance satisfaction. They found absolutely nothing to complain about. From that point on, we decided to do more cruising.”

In 2011, Young set up a seven-night, full- charter cruise to Alaska aboard the Regent Seven Seas. The cruise scored a satisfaction score of 4.86 out of 5.0 among the 250 attendees.

Earlier this year, Young arranged a seven-night Scandinavian cruise aboard Silver Cloud, which included ports of call in Sweden, Denmark and Germany. “We used the ship as a floating hotel, staying two nights in a port,” says Young. “A lot of planners go to a different port every day. They think it’s the best way to get the best bang for the buck. But I don’t think it’s the best use of time because you can’t experience the location.”

Young also is considering another full-charter cruise to the Greek Islands in 2018. Another benefit of booking a full- charter is the freedom to tailor the events to match the company’s meeting objective. For example, Norwegian Cruise Line allows a company to incorporate its brand and logo into every aspect of the ship, from banners on the side of the vessel to ice sculptures, napkins and menus. Planners can customize itineraries as well as activities, parties and entertainment.

And at Carnival Cruise Line, for instance, planners can use the Carnival Corporate University to tailor teambuilding, communication and leadership programs.

Cruise Trends

Groups also are taking longer cruises, says Shari Wallack, president of Buy the Sea, a Plantation, Florida-based, all-inclusive resort brokerage company. “There is a willingness to book seven-night cruises in order to experience more exotic destinations. Years ago, shorter cruises were more in fashion,” she says. “Sparing time away from the office is always more of an issue than the budget. A land program in Europe tends to be more expensive than its cruise counterpart.”

River cruising has come a long way, too. “The hottest charter at the moment is the river cruise,” says Wallack. “Years ago, no one understood the river cruise industry. Now there is a big market for it. The only downside is that you can’t put more than about 180–200 people on a river cruise ship. The ships are small — but luxurious. They are like boutique hotels that happen to move.”

“A big trend is more restaurants,” says Wallack. “They are coming up with alternatives to the regular dining experiences.” Carnival’s recently christened Regal Princess features several dining options including Chef’s Table Lumiere, a private dining experience that surrounds guests in a curtain of light. Royal Caribbean’s Voyager of the Seas, which recently received an $80 million makeover, features three new restaurants — Izumi Japanese Cuisine, Giovanni’s Table, an Italian trattoria and Chops Grille, a steak house.

The Carnival Legend, which recently set sail following a multimillion-dollar makeover, offers Bonsai Sushi and Redfrog Pub. The ship also features Flahro, The Game Show and Waterworks Aqua Park.

Health and wellness programs are trending for land meetings, and cruise meetings are no exception. Celebrity partnered with Canyon Ranch, a leading spa and wellness brand, and now offers Canyon Ranch SpaClub at Sea facilities on 10 Celebrity ships. The Canyon Ranch facilities feature spa, wellness, beauty salon and fitness facilities. Treatments and services are tailored to guest preferences. Group classes and private consultations also are available.

Improved internet access and other technology are also trending. Carnival recently introduced what the company hails as the cruise industry’s first-of-its-kind hybrid wireless network called Wi-Fi@Sea. The enhanced high-speed service was launched during the last quarter of 2014 for ships sailing in the Caribbean and will eventually be available on all of Carnival’s ships in 2015 and 2016.

Wi-Fi@Sea will integrate a unique combination of strategically located land-based antennas installed along cruise routes, Wi-Fi from a port connection and advanced satellites, forming an innovative network that is a first in the cruise industry on this scale. The “smart hybrid” network is designed to provide passengers and crew with faster and more stable Internet access throughout their voyage.

Regent Seven Seas has completed a multimillion-dollar upgrade to Internet systems on every ship. The cruise line also introduced unlimited complimentary Internet access for all guests sailing after January 1, 2015 for guests booked in Manhattan, Great Barrier Reef, Mariner, Navigator and Voyager suites.

MSC Cruises has launched a new, interactive mobile app, which allows travelers to easily explore the fleet’s 12 ultramodern ships and the multiple destinations visited around the world. The free MSC Cruises app is packed with easy-to-use features, tips and information, from finding the perfect itinerary and shore excursions to 360-degree virtual ship tours in which users can view actual staterooms, restaurants, lounges, pool decks, the theater and spa.

More Meeting Space, Entertainment, Activities

Large and small cruise ships are catering to groups with meeting space. Royal Caribbean has at least 22 ships with conference centers. The cruise line’s Quantum of the Seas features the first Project Edge ship to easily explore the fleet’s 12 ultramodern ships and the multiple destinations visited around the world. The free MSC Cruises app is packed with easy-to-use features, tips and information, from finding the perfect itinerary and shore excursions to 360-degree virtual ship tours in which users can view actual staterooms, restaurants, lounges, pool decks, the theater and spa.

New Ships

Celebrity Cruises, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary, recently signed a letter of intent to build two new ships under Project Edge. The two vessels will offer small-ship itineraries with large ship amenities. The first Project Edge ship is scheduled for delivery in fall 2018, while the second will be delivered in fall 2019. Royal Caribbean International is building its third Quantum class smart ship, Ovation of the Seas, which will be delivered in Fall 2016. Royal Caribbean also introduced two Radiance-class ships — Rhapsody of the Seas and Splendor of the Seas — earlier this year.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises will debut the 727-guest Seven Seas Explorer in summer 2016. The ship will feature one of the highest staff-to-guest ratios in the cruise industry. Regent also re-
With the addition of the two new Diadema. In addition, Carnival’s P&O 22
5.
3.
2.
1.
Ovation will maintain the line’s high
Cruises UK and Aida brands will
unveiled the names of
its two new ships —
Seabourn Encore and
Seabourn Ovation. The first will
launch in late 2015 and the second in
spring 2018.
Seabourn Encore and Seabourn
Ovation will maintain the line’s high
erow of space per guest, enabling high-
ly personalized service by close to one
staff member for each guest on board.
With the addition of the two new ships, Seabourn will have the young-
est and most modern ultra-luxury fleet
in the industry.
Seabourn Encore and Seabourn
Ovation will be configured with one
additional deck, newly expanded
public areas, and modern design ele-
ments and innovations consistent with
Seabourn’s reputation for understated
elegance. The new 40,350-GRT vessels
are expected to carry 604
guests each, based on double
occupancy, and every suite will feature a
private veranda.
Hospitality design icon Adam
Tihany has signed on to design
both Seabourn Encore and Seabourn
Ovation in their entirety. He will de-
sign all indoor and outdoor guest areas,
including the multiple dining venues,
The Spa at Seabourn, showrooms, ca-
sino and lounges, outdoor deck areas,
and the popular Seabourn Square, the
simple and less time-consuming. There is a range of ships — from large luxuri-
ous cruise ships to smaller deluxe vessels
— that meet the needs of groups of all
sizes. Planners can select from 3- to 10-
day cruises as well as full-ship charters.
Gale described it best: “A cruise ship
can be a city by itself with everything
you need aboard the ship. You can do
tings you can’t do on land, and you still
have the land stuff to do when you dock
at ports.”

There’s a willingness to book seven-
night cruises in order to experience
more exotic destinations. Years ago,
shorter cruises were more in fashion.”
Shari Wallack,
President
Buy the Sea, Plantation, FL

Top Trends to Look for in 2015
Cruising has never been more popular, say the experts at CruiseCompete. In fact, there are 35 new ocean ships and 21 new river ships scheduled to debut by 2018.
1. Cruising as a company perk. Company-paid cruise vacations will become a way to entice, and keep, a company’s best employees, by showing appreciation for someone’s work while rejuvenating them to peak performance.
2. GPS tracking of children. Parents who want to keep close tabs on their children will have the option this year to equip them with handy new wristband GPS units.
3. All-inclusive options continue to increase at a rapid pace, in particular for the luxury and ultra-luxury sector. CruiseCompete just keeps adding included amenities to the comprehensive chart detailing what is included on cruises. In fact, cruise lines have said they use this chart frequently to see what their competition is adding to the cruise experience. See the included amenities here: allthingscruise.com/allinclusive.
4. Ultimate luxury and adventure. Cruise lines keep coming up with more over-the-top experiences — onboard and ashore. Also, more private areas are being built into ships, so that VIPs can book areas with dedicated pool, dining room, concierge and other amenities.
5. Past favorites become new again. The all-important baby boomer demographic will flourish as the cruise lines bring back favorites from the past. Companies such as Princess Cruises will continue to be a favorite for baby boomers seeking comfort from familiar experiences like the “Love Boat.
6. Enhanced technology and personalization. Technology will become even more advanced in areas such as bars and restaurants, and ships will have in-room tablets to book future cruises. Luxury cruise lines also will keep an automated record of passengers’ preferences and build mini bar/personal hygiene baskets to their liking.
7. Focus on the family and multigenerational travel. Family suites will offer on-demand nannies for the duration of a cruise. The lines also will design programs that appeal to multigenerational groups, where children, parents and grandparents all play a part.

Final Thoughts
What’s not to like about rotating cruises among incentives? All-inclusive pricing makes budgeting and planning

“Past favorites become new again. The all-important baby boomer demographic will flourish as the cruise lines bring back favorites from the past. Companies such as Princess Cruises will continue to be a favorite for baby boomers seeking comfort from familiar experiences like the “Love Boat.””

— DR

Boost your business and reward your associates with a new world of cruising aboard our newest ship, Norwegian Escape. Debuting Fall of 2015, some of her inspiring innovations include:
• Customizable Group Functions — Dedicated meeting space and multiple group venues, complimentary state-of-the-art AV equipment in addition to options for custom catered refreshments, cocktail parties, entertainment and group dining.
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• Bars & Lounges — Pull up a stool on The Waterfront and find your favorite vintage at The Cellars - A Michael Mondavi Family Wine Bar or order one of more than 50 different bottled beers at the District Brew House and it’s happy hour every hour at the 5 O’Clock Somewhere Bar.
• The Best Variety of Entertainment on Water — Every night will be music to your ears with the entertaining options on board Norwegian Escape including the smash hit musical After Midnight, live music throughout the ship and laugh out loud at Headliners Comedy Club.
• Flexible Accommodations — From our private world of luxury at sea, The Haven by Norwegian® to our well-appointed Studios priced for solo travelers.
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Conference Centers

Configured for Success

Why the Conference Center Environment ‘Helps Your Attendees Leave Differently Than When They Came’

By Karen Brost

As senior manager of catering and conference services for the Boston-based law firm Goodwin Procter LLP, Gia Casale plans many kinds of events. But when the agenda calls for a strong focus on taking care of business, she finds that conference centers are the best fit for her. “A conference center is geared more specifically toward business meetings,” she explains. “The AV is in the room. Everything that you may need for that meeting room is set and ready to go. The snacks, the beverages, tend to be outside the meeting rooms. You’re sharing that area with other companies, whereas when we go to a hotel, we are ordering for our group only, so it tends to be a higher cost. I think you get a better value at a conference center.” She adds that not having to contract with an outside company for AV services, as she typically would have to do at a hotel, is another cost-saving advantage of using conference centers.

One conference center Casale has used many times is the Stoweflake Mountain Resort & Spa in Stowe, Vermont. The 120-room property, which is set on more than 60 acres, includes a 22,000-sf IACC-certified conference center that contains 15 meeting rooms. The resort also offers many recreational amenities such as a 50,000-sf spa, skiing in the winter, and hiking, biking and golf in the summer.

IACC (the International Association of Conference Centres) is a global professional association that represents small- to medium-sized venues that focus on meetings, training courses and conferences. The organization has 400 members in 21 countries, and each member conference center agrees to adhere to a set of standards designed to create an exceptional meeting experience. These standards cover elements such as soundproofing, technology, ergonomic seating, lighting, unobstructed interior views and continuous refreshment service.

Companies that use IACC-certified conference centers also receive a 24-hour hold on their meeting space, so they can leave their materials, displays and other items in the room overnight. This saves the time and effort involved in re-staging the room in the morning because it had been used for another event the night before.

Modified Meeting Packages

Conference centers also make the budgeting process easier by offering a package price that includes accommodations, meeting space, AV services, three meals a day and continuous breaks. This all-inclusive package is typically known as a CMP (Complete Meeting Package), but a survey completed in late 2013 by PHG Research, a division of Pompan Hospitality Global Inc., found that many customers now prefer to opt for an MMP (Modified Meeting Package) so they can customize the package to meet their needs.

When the survey was released, Neil Pompan, president and CEO of Pompan Hospitality Global, who previously served as North American president and global president for IACC, explained, “The data supports our belief that the meeting experience is critical for facilities that want to thrive.”

When asked where the market stands today, Pompan responded, “The pendulum is not swinging back. If anything, if I were to redo this survey this year, I would speculate that we’re going to find very similar findings or maybe even findings that are even more supportive of what we found last time.

“We call it a CMP or we call it a DMP, but to me that’s not what they’re buying,” he continues. “They’re really buying a meeting experience. They’re buying the ability to have a better outcome.

At the end of the day, people want good outcomes.”

Casale says that she generally modifies the basic CMP, for example, to add a better wine or to incorporate different types of hors d’oeuvres that aren’t included in the basic package. “A lot of times I’ll mix and match. I want this need, and of value. Therefore, flexibility in how packages are offered is critical for facilities that want to thrive.”

When the data was first made public in late 2013, Neil Pompan, president and CEO of Pompan Hospitality Global, responded, “The pendulum is not swinging back. If anything, if I were to redo this survey this year, I would speculate that we’re going to find very similar findings or maybe even findings that are even more supportive of what we found last time.

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Service Trumps All

She adds that Stoweflake has been very accommodating in meeting her special requests. “I wanted everything Vermont,” notes Casale. “I wanted Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. I wanted Cabot cheeses, and they not only met my requests but were very, very accommodating to our budget.”

“They’re very good at working with you,” she continues. “I feel like it’s a family-owned business and their goal is to make sure that your meeting is really a success and that your networking events are successful. The shuttle comes to take them to the mountain, and they help you with all of the ancillary things that you need to get done (like) the child care. Sometimes you call these things conference centers and they don’t have that piece set up, so you’re calling a DMC or you’re begging the hotel to call you about golf. It’s all done there (at Stoweflake). They’re taking care of you. It’s full service.”

She stressed how important that is. “Service, no matter how much you spend, is something you can’t buy,” she explains. She adds that if someone asks her for a recommendation for a good property to use, she’s more likely to recommend one that offers great service over one that may be the most beautiful. “Service trumps everything,” she notes.

She also praised the Mt. Washington Conference Center located near Baltimore. The IACC-certified conference center offers 48 guest rooms and 10,500 sf of meeting space. “They have phenomenal service,” Casale notes. “They really care about the guests and the guest experience.”

Q Stands for Quality

Susan O’Dea, executive assistant to the president and CEO of Chicago Tube & Iron, has used another IACC-certified conference center, the Q Center, for the past five years for her company’s annual sales meeting that draws anywhere from 100-130 attendees. Located in St. Charles, Illinois, about an hour west of
The Dolce Difference

Q Center is one of 10 conference centers included in the Dolce Hotels & Resorts portfolio. Others are located in Connecticut, Georgia, New York and Texas in the U.S., as well as in Germany, Belgium and Ontario, Canada.

Dolce also offers flexibility in its meeting packages through its program called CMP 3.0. Under this program, planners can choose The CMP Traditional, which includes accommodations, three meals per day, continuous breaks at Nourishment Hubs, fast wireless Internet, use of a business center and a dedicated meeting concierge, among other services. The CMP Select package includes the same services with two meals per day, and planners can upgrade any package to include Signature Events such as a chef’s table, teambuilding activity or golf.

Day by Day

The FHG survey also found that day meeting packages (DMPs) are popular. One-third of the properties responding to the survey reported that day packages represent 40 percent or more of their business. However, DMPs are not only used for single-day events. Some clients find a greater value in purchasing a DMP with a separate guest room rate.

"From a competitor’s standpoint, I’m seeing more and more hotels offering day meeting packages," Pompan notes. “They not only include the food and beverage, but more and more I’m seeing them include basic audio-visual and other related meeting support, for example, the meeting room. That’s a very powerful thing. One of the biggest things that meeting planners have to pay for after high-speed Internet is meeting room rental. (The hotel might offer) lunch, break service, a meeting room, a projector and a couple of flip charts. That’s a very watered down version of what IACC does, but to the large majority of meeting planners, that’s what they want. It’s a big step up for the hotels and very appealing to the majority of customers.”

Sustainability Best Practices

In an effort to encourage best practices in sustainability at its member conference centers, IACC has developed a Code of Sustainability that includes 60 tenets in areas such as education and awareness, waste management, recycling, reuse, water conservation, energy management, air quality, and food and beverage. Based on their level of participation in these tenets, IACC-certified conference centers can achieve status as an IACC GreenStar facility at the Silver, Gold or Platinum Levels.

More Conference Center Options

IACC continues to add more conference centers to its membership base, and most recently, the organization welcomed its first member in Ukraine, the UIRI Conference Hall in Hilevka, as well as additional conference centers in the UK, Sweden, Scotland and Australia.

In the U.S., some current members include the Kingessige Marriott Conference Center in Cincinnati; the Eagle Ridge Resort and Spa in Mount Prospect, Illinois; the Laureates Conference Center at Franklin Institute in Philadelphia; and the Water's Edge Events Center in Belcamp, Maryland.

In 2014, Benchmark Hospitality International announced the introduction of Benchmark Conference Centers.

The company now uses this designation to classify properties that are purpose-built and offer personally tailored service, locally sourced and customized cuisine, and four-diamond lodging to provide what the company describes as "the most productive, rewarding and authentic meeting experience in the industry." All of these properties conform to IACC standards, although IACC membership is not a prerequisite.

There are currently 12 Benchmark Conference Centers in the U.S.: Bonaventure Resort & Spa in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Chaminade Resort & Spa in Santa Cruz, California; Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Downtown Conference Center in New York City; Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Chicago; Haworth Inn & Conference Center in Briar Cliff Manor, New York; Hotel Contessa in San Antonio; Scottsdale Resort and Conference Center in Scottsdale, Arizona; Stonewall Resort in Roanoke, West Virginia; The Chattanoogaan Hotel in Chattanooga, Tennessee; The Hildreth in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Pavilion at North Park in Blacksburg, Virginia. Two additional Benchmark Certified Conference Centers are located in Tokyo.

Setting the Stage for Success

Pompan explains why it’s so important to create the right environment for a meeting. "It's the difference between service and hospitality," he notes. "Service is delivering a technical thing. Hospitality is making people feel good about it while you're doing it. Meetings are the same way. Most hotels can pro-

"A lot of times I’ll mix and match. I want this from this package, but I want that from that package."
Promoting a city effectively is in part an educational effort: convention and visitors bureaus seek to correct any misconceptions about their destination and raise awareness of its lesser-known virtues. It is of course a boon to the local tourism and meetings industry when the town receives positive attention in the national media, but simply being noticed will not create a full appreciation of what the city has to offer.

**Rediscovering Nashville**

Nashville, for example, has been increasingly in the news in recent years with Music City Center opening in May 2013 and the Country Music Hall of Fame completing a $100 million, 210,000 sf expansion last year. The press that resulted, not to mention ABC’s “Nashville” series, which debuted in 2012, made the city “like a new discovery to a lot of folks. It’s been a great spotlight for us,” says Butch Spyridon, president and CEO of the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

Yet a deeper knowledge of the city’s culture among the general populace, including some meeting planners, can still be achieved, Spyridon feels. “Everybody is aware of Nashville as the home of country music. It’s been a big benefit for us, but at the same time it’s kept a lot of people from understanding the depth and breadth of the city, the dining scene, the diversity of music and the overall quality of the destination,” he explains. “And that seems to be going through a transformation as well, where on one hand people have a broader understanding of how big country music is, and even better for us a broader understanding of the overall music scene in Nashville, which includes gospel, rock (and other elements of Americana).” (Also see “The New Nashville” on page 44.)

Beyond a diverse music scene, Nashville boasts historical sites that the CVC often brings to planners’ attention, including Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage, currently celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, and The Parthenon at Centennial Park, built in 1897. “So we have the home of a president and an exact replica of the Parthenon in Athens, both of which are incredible event venues,” says Spyridon. And it takes a little work to raise awareness of such features among corporate meeting planners, who naturally view the city mainly as a great place for country music-themed programs.

**Clearing the Air in L.A.**

On the West Coast, the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board (LACVB) has similar work to do in raising awareness of the new Broad Museum, opening downtown this fall. When planners think of Los Angeles, they tend to focus on offsite possibilities such as the L.A. Live entertainment district and Universal Studios Hollywood. Museums may not come to mind, but the Broad Museum could change that, insofar as it will house “the largest collection of contemporary art in the U.S.,” notes Darren Green, senior vice president of sales with the LACVB. “Customers are wowed about it when they visit: ‘I never expected that L.A. would offer that.’”

In terms of misconceptions, some planners may harbor a view of the city’s second-most populous city as highly congested and polluted. But Los Angeles’ transportation will be eased with the expansion of the city’s metro rail in the next couple of years, Green notes, and “you’ll be able to take the subway all the way to Santa Monica from the convention center. Eventually you’ll be able to take the metro downtown all the way to the airport.”

The L.A. Metro is one of the city’s underappreciated aspects, Green feels, but the TCB has made strides in that regard. “We had a customer advisory board meeting back in October and held it at Universal Studios. We put all of the customers on the metro and took the subway downtown. It was an incredible experience. The L.A. Metro is new, so it’s very clean, with no graffiti and very safe...
Partnering for Planners

Some cities have turned out to be quite marketable in pairs or groups, a recent example being Synchronicities. A coast-to-coast, three-city partnership comprised of the Baltimore, San Antonio and Anaheim CVBs, Synchronicities is based on sharing knowledge about meetings that will be held in all three destinations (typically in different years), in order to streamline service to planners.

A precursor to Synchronicities is the partnership of Visit Pittsburgh, Visit Milwaukee and Travel Portland. Established in 2004, the partnership is also based on knowledge-sharing and planners have a financial incentive to book the trio (for example, planners who book two or three cities receive $1 per room night from each contracted city for each year).

On the international front, BestCities, the first convention bureau alliance, currently comprises Berlin, Cape Town, Chicago, Copenhagen, Dubai, Edinburgh, Houston, Melbourne, Singapore and Vancouver. BestCities is a three-city program — with standards certified by Lloyd’s Register Quality Assurance (LRQA) — to ensure a consistent level of convention bureau service excellence from all partner cities, including the meeting program data exchange that is the hallmark of these partnerships.

San Antonio’s convention center is set along the banks of River Walk.

Michelle Harris, director of events with Columbus, Ohio-based Thirty-One Gifts, a direct sales company, planned a successful National Conference for about 6,000 of the company’s consultants in Denver last July. Gatherings for all the participants were held at the Pepsi Arena, while training programs, awards ceremonies and more were held at the Colorado Convention Center where they could break out the groups. Beginning with her site visit, the experience “enlightened” Harris on the metropolis’ smooth transportation logistics. “It’s so easy to get around and walkable,” she remarks. “And we went into it thinking that the location of the Pepsi Arena...seven to nine blocks away from the convention center and most of the hotels was really going to impact what we did with traffic. Quite honestly, it never became a problem at all.”

A Studied Approach to Fam Trips

“We do consumer research every year, and in our study, we found that people think of Denver as very friendly, diverse, young and active,” says Benedick. Accordingly, Visit Denver affords planners opportunities to do something active on site inspections and fam trips, as opposed to just viewing meeting spaces and speaking with hotels. “We have plenty of urban adventures, such as biking around the city using Denver B-cycle (our citywide bike-sharing program), grabbing a beer at one of the more than 30 breweries in Denver, or even taking in a baseball game and a sunset at Coors Field,” she adds.

The LATCB is investing more in the fam trips, notes Green, but at the same time tailoring the programs to what planners will tend to want to do in the city with their groups. “Many planners who do incentive programs or themed events want to do a red carpet event similar to the one we do,” she says. “So we give customers some creative ideas on how to put that L.A. spin on their program when they host it here.”

We’ll try to do fam trips around the Grammys, the American Music Awards, the Emmy Awards and People’s Choice Awards. We have access to the shows and venues with our partnerships here at the LATCB, so we can select customers to come have that red carpet experience. Many will want to use those venues for their conferences.”

The Nashville CVA has been taking a more targeted approach to familiarization, says Spyridon. “If a planner is interested in coming to try to customize the (experience). If it’s one or two people at a time, that’s fine. We find we would rather talk specifically to someone who has interest in areas such as hotel map sharing, quality prospects, our closing rate is significantly higher.”

The same effort to customize carries over to the destination marketing for the meeting itself. In providing marketing assistance, “we really try to listen and see what the needs are and come up with customized solutions,” says Spyridon. “It might be social media, designing a Web page, creating logos, etc.” And again, the emphasis is on moving away from generic country music themes. “If planners engage us, I’d say we have had a great deal of success in broadening that. If they do it in a vacuum, they tend to gravitate toward the easy, stereotypical approach,” he observes. “There are ways to use the music theme that are not as predictable. For example, you might use lyrical words that tie into the brand, playing on words like ‘harmony,’ when you talk about bringing your attendees in harmony, and getting them in tune. Instead of boots and a banjo, how about a keyboard or a woodwind instrument? These are ways to leverage (the music theme) but also broaden it.”

Planning Tools

CVBs also can be part of the planning process by equipping planners and attendees with tools that help them navigate the city. Visit Denver has recently launched an interactive Denver Destination Planning Guide iPad app that allows planners to quickly and conveniently find everything — from hotel maps and restaurant listings to unique venues and itineraries in Denver and throughout Colorado.

Given their long-term booking of rotating installments of the same meeting, it is association groups that typically take advantage of CVB partnerships. But that doesn’t mean a corporate group can’t benefit from CVBs working together to service their program, as was the case when Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based Meetings Info planned a “town and country” incentive program for a garage door distributor and manufacturer.

“The event will bring about 150 couples to Sonoma County, California, with side trips to San Francisco,” she says. “It’s going to be a getaway for the couples, while training programs, awards ceremonies, Fam trips and private dinners for the partners will be held in Sonoma.”

Sandy Rom, CMP owner of Meetings Info, partnered for the first time with both San Francisco Travel and the Sonoma County Tourism. “It appears that they work very nicely together: Everybody seems to be online with sharing information,” says Rom. “The timing was just perfect for us. Sonoma is so quaint and relaxing, with the beautiful town square that they have and all the little shops and restaurants. And you combine that with the nightlife and fun of San Francisco. So it’s an ideal situation.”

Future Client Satisfaction

As much as CVBs do for corporate clients before and during each event, they also can help to ensure that future meetings are successful by soliciting client feedback on their meeting venue projects. For example, while Los Angeles works to get a major expo and modernization plan approved for its convention center, the LATCB is seeking feedback from both association and corporate meetings on what they would like to see in the new and improved facility. “We want to make sure we’re investing in the right areas that will attract the groups we want to bring to L.A.,” Green says. “We’d rather see what we call a white paper asking questions about the ideal amount of meeting space, breakout space, connectivity, the flexibility of the space and so on.”

Similarly, Visit Denver has completed a yearlong study of the Colorado Convention Center, “which offered recommendations on what we need to do to keep the building relevant to changing needs in the meeting industry,” Benedick says. An updated convention center will help the city fulfill what the CVB sees as a “potential huge growth in attendance in fields such as medical, biosciences, energy and technology/engineering,” she adds. These kinds of studies can certainly have a destination-marketing angle. They position the city as one that takes a proactive approach to planner satisfaction.

CRIT
Year after year, decade after decade, Florida ranks as one of the most prized meeting destinations in the U.S., especially during the winter. The Sunshine State offers a vast array of options, with a list of singular and unique individual destinations that offer something for every taste, from fashionable Palm Beach and fabled Amelia Island, to the world-renowned beaches of Sandestin, the sprawling metropolitan chic of Tampa/St. Petersburg, and the international appeal of red-hot Miami.

Amelia Island
When Houston-based commercial real estate firm Transwestern was looking for an upscale East Coast destination for its 225-attendee annual executive leadership meeting, which had been held on the West Coast for several years, Kim Croley, executive vice president, national marketing and communications, chose Amelia Island, near Jacksonville in the northeast corridor of the Sunshine State.

As her hotel for the April event, Croley selected the 1,350-acre, 404-room Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, which features a long list of recreational amenities including a spa, tennis courts and three Audubon International Certified Sanctuary golf courses.

“I have literally seen every major hotel in Florida that is big enough for us, from Miami to Jacksonville,” Croley says. “But for a number of reasons, we have very specific criteria when we’re looking at sites. Our decisions depend on a lot of different factors. For example, we like to have a good golf course onsite. We like to have a fairly good sized spa. We also take up a lot of ballroom space. And we like to have a plethora of recreational activities onsite. So when you take all of those things into account, our options are actually pretty limited.”

Recreational activities are very important to this particular meeting because “we have an entire afternoon of recreation,” Croley says. “And we typically offer five or six options that people can choose from, whether that’s playing in our golf tournament, or a spa experience, fishing or kayaking. All 225 of our attendees choose something to be a part of. And when you’re a group that large, you have to have a diverse list of things you can do on-property.”

The recreational component of the company’s most important meeting is an element of Transwestern’s corporate culture, Croley says, and the leadership meeting is considered critical to their overall success. “And we always bill it as including relaxation, networking and recognition,” Croley says.

Popular activities at Omni, in addition to the golf course, included a Segway tour of the vast resort. “The resort is large, so they give you a training lesson on the Segway and then they take you on a guided tour of the grounds of the property,” Croley says.

Another highlight was saltwater kayaking through the adjacent marshland.

The Sunshine State Delivers
How Meeting in Sunny Florida Motivates and Inspires
By John Buchanan
Golf was a big hit. The company staged a shotgun tournament for about 95 people on the afternoon of the second day, during the same time other attendees enjoyed different recreational activities.

Other highlights of the meeting included an opening night reception that transitioned into an awards banquet. The reception included heavy hors d’oeuvres with an open bar that featured high-end wines. "This particular group is a bunch of foodies and wine connoisseurs," Croley says, "so excellent food and wine are very important to them. They want the best of the best."

The sit-down dinner that followed was held in the hotel’s newest ballroom, completed as part of an extensive renovation when Omni took control of the property. Awards were given out to top-producing brokers, as well as a property manager of the year.

Croley also has high praise for the Omni Amelia Island’s newest ballroom, completed as part of an extensive renovation when Omni took control of the property. Awards were given out to top-producing brokers, as well as a property manager of the year.

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attendees from China, United Kingdom, France, Poland, India and Brazil.

Paszek submitted RFPs to several Florida destinations, and the primary reasons for the selection of Tampa/St. Petersburg were value proposition and airlift, she says. “It was convenient for all of our attendees to get to Tampa, even those coming in from around the world.”

For her hotel, Paszek chose the AAA Four Diamond, 277-room Loews Don CeSar Hotel St. Pete Beach, which features 22,000 sf of newly renovated meeting space and 16,000 sf of premium outdoor event space, as well as Spa Oceana, and 24-hour fitness and business centers. Its flagship restaurant, Maritana Grille, was voted one of the top 10 seafood restaurants in the U.S. by Gayote Guide.

The decision to choose the hotel was instantaneous when she went on a site visit, Paszek says. “As soon as I walked in the door, I knew it was the right property for the meeting. I knew it was the one I wanted. I have a great relationship with the Loews brand because they really are a relationship-based brand. But I didn’t know about the Loews Don CeSar. I had called my Loews rep and I said I wasn’t finding what I wanted in Florida, so she put me in touch with the property. And that was it. Once I saw the property, we were all set.”

During her meeting, Paszek received exemplary service. “For me as a planner — and I stressed this to them beforehand — if something is not working, I want to know that before my people know that,” she says. “And they were very good at our room setups, because they knew they were going to be difficult, based on what we needed and wanted. But I was able to go in and talk about it and get things resolved before anyone was even on the floor. The level of communication with the service staff was just outstanding.”

She also gives strong reviews to Loews Don CeSar’s F&B service. “We do full, hot breakfast buffets, lunch and dinner on site,” she says. “And everything was very smooth and on time. The setups were also great. They do a beautiful presentation with food and beverage. And they do everything a little differently with each meal just to step up the experience. And again, the service was right on point for every meal.”

A highlight of the meeting was an opening night reception in a ballroom located on the first floor. “It’s a totally unique room,” Paszek says. “It’s just spectacular. Our attendees loved it.”

And the flow of the room, she adds, was important because networking is vitally important to this meeting.

Attendees also gave the destination and hotel rave reviews in Paszek’s post-meeting survey. “Everyone was very positive,” she says. “They loved the area and they loved the property.”

Palm Beach County

Last year, when West Caldwell, New Jersey-based Ricoh Americas Corporation was looking for a new destination for its annual three-day leadership meeting, which draws 175 attendees from the company’s chairman down to its top executives, Dayle Russell, senior manager, corporate events, opted for Palm Beach County.

Russell and her management were drawn to Palm Beach County because it’s a classic upscale Florida beach destination. “People recognize (the Palm Beaches) as a nice destination for a meeting,” Russell says. “It’s also a great location for a meeting at that time of year.”

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A signature golf hole, one of 36 championship golf holes, at Ponte Vedra Inn & Club near Jacksonville in Ponte Vedra Beach.
time on the golf course as part of the meeting, Russell selected the AAA Four Diamond PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens. The resort features 39,000 sf of conference space and five golf courses including The Champion course, home to the PGA Tour's annual Honda Classic.

The meeting kicked off with a round of golf, followed that evening with a buffet dinner at the outdoor Honda Pavilion venue. “The Honda Pavilion is a beautiful venue,” Russell said. “And the food was excellent. I can’t count all the people who came up to me and said, ‘That was a wonderful dinner.’ It was just a great way to get people mingling and talking with each other. It got the meeting off to a great start to a pretty intense business meeting.”

The next day consisted of intensive meeting sessions. “Then that night, we did a dine-around,” Russell says. “And there are a number of great restaurants close to the hotel. The hotel also has some wonderful restaurants, but when you’re sitting in a meeting all day, it’s nice to get out and experience some other places.”

Russell used Boca Raton-based destination management company Ancomp to select Café Chardonnay, Carmine’s LaTrattoria, III Forks, Seasons 52, Spoto’s Oyster Bar, and Vic and Angelo’s as her area restaurants — and gave them all rave reviews.

She and her attendees also gave high marks to PGA National, which has completed a four-year, $100 million renovation. “People loved PGA National,” Russell says. “The feedback I got from the leadership team was that we should absolutely consider coming back next year for the leadership. And we’re actually going back for a different meeting in October.”

Attendees were impressed by how smoothly the meeting went, Russell says. “And that means everything from the food and beverage to the setup and use of the meeting space. The service level was wonderful. And it wasn’t just the banquet staff that gave us great service. It was everybody, from the bell staff to housekeeping and shipping.”

She also singles out her sales manager, Robin Prakash, for praise. “I’ve been planning meetings for a long time,” she says. “And in all the years I’ve been doing this, he was one of the best sales managers I have ever dealt with. And he’s part of the reason we’re going back. I just can’t say enough about PGA. For me as a planner and for all of our attendees, you just go in there and you feel very comfortable. Everyone is very nice and the service level is just wonderful. And based on all that, it’s definitely a property that is now on our radar as one of our favorites for our meetings.”

Miami

Laurie Mayson, customer relations and communications specialist at Birmingham, Alabama-based Integrated Medical Systems (IMS), a medical instrument and repair company, plans a series of eight seminars held throughout the year for 35–40 decision-makers from hospitals. By definition, the meeting requires a high-end resort property. And each year, all eight of the meetings take place at the same hotel, from January through November.

For the past several years, IMS had used a property in Fort Lauderdale. This year, however, Mayson moved them to the 408-room Turnberry Isle Miami, a member of Marriott’s Autograph Collection. Turnberry Isle features more than 40,000 sf of meeting space, including a 12,080-sf Grand Ballroom. The Magnolia Courtyard is a 4,000-sf Mediterranean-style outdoor terrace that overlooks the famous 18th hole on Turnberry’s Raymond Floyd-designed golf course. The resort property also features a Bourbon Steak restaurant from celebrity chef Michael Mina and a Cascata Grill, which serves sophisticated Mediterranean fare.

Mayson and the other members of IMS’ site selection team visited Turnberry Isle last year. “We were immediately sold on the property and the staff,” she says. “A key factor in the decision was Turnberry’s range of meeting facilities and related amenities.”

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“We were looking for a resort-type venue,” Mayson says. “And one of the key selling points for us is that there are so many things to do on the property.”

Rest and relaxation for attendees is a key component of the meeting. “These are hospital employees that are in high-stress jobs,” Mayson says. “All they do is work, work, work. So this meeting is sort of their vacation. And Turnberry Isle is a place where in their free time they can play golf, or go to a great fitness center, or take a shuttle to Aventura Mall across the street.” The hotel offers free shuttle service to the world-famous Aventura Mall every 30 minutes. Turnberry also offers free shuttle service to their private beach club on the ocean, about 10 minutes away.

“The other selling point for us was the property itself,” Mayson says. “It’s just beautiful.” They also liked the fact that it is located away from the mayhem of South Beach and bustling downtown Miami. “You just forget about all of that while you’re here,” Mayson says. “It is a very quiet, peaceful and relaxing resort with spacious, inviting and comfortable hotel rooms. It feels like home away from home. The meeting room accommodations, the professional staff and the friendly hospitality are the reasons we continue to return to the Turnberry.” Mayson also singled out Turnberry for its well-known standard of service. “They go out of their way to make sure we are happy,” she says. “They follow up really well with their customer surveys asking me how things went. And I always give them good reviews.”

**New & Noteworthy**

Central Florida’s **Streamsong Resort**, home to two golf courses, has announced plans to build a third course — **Streamsong Black**. Set to open in autumn 2017, the course will be designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw and Renaissance Golf Design (Tom Doak), respectively. With the addition of Streamsong Black, the resort will become the only location in the world where guests can enjoy three distinct courses designed by these four legendary architects.

The resort plans to add a second practice facility, clubhouse and restaurant to serve guests playing Streamsong Black. In addition to world-class golf, Streamsong features a 216-room Lodge, with three casual and fine dining restaurants, conference and event facilities, a spa and infinity pool.

Streamsong Black will be built directly southeast of the two existing courses, Streamsong Red and Streamsong Blue — designed by Gil Hanse and Ben Crenshaw and Renaissance Golf Design (Tom Doak), respectively. With the addition of Streamsong Black, the resort will become the only location in the world where guests can enjoy three distinct courses designed by these four legendary architects.

The resort plans to add a second practice facility, clubhouse and restaurant to serve guests playing Streamsong Black. In addition to world-class golf, Streamsong features a 216-room Lodge, with three casual and fine dining restaurants, conference and event facilities, a spa and infinity pool.

Streamsong Black. Set to open in autumn 2017, the course will be designed by Gil Hanse, architect of The Olympic Golf Course in Rio de Janeiro and co-designer of Castle Stuart Golf Links in Scotland, among others.

New events, attractions, meeting venues and hotel renovations in **Jacksonville** include renovations at the Crowne Plaza Jacksonville Riverfront, which will become a DoubleTree Hilton by August 2015; an 88-room TownPlace Suites by Marriott will be located next to a Hampton Inn & Suites; a Courtyard by Marriott is set to open late 2016 in downtown Jacksonville; and renovations have been completed on the new DoubleTree Hilton at the Jacksonville International Airport.

New meeting venues and renovations: The new Jessie Ball DuPont Center (formerly the Haydon Burns Library) in downtown Jacksonville is expected to open in June 2015 as a nonprofit hub. After a $21 million renovation, the building will house a conference center, a lecture hall, 12 meeting rooms, reception spaces, a catering kitchen and more, including plans for a green roof garden that will be available for special events.

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George Aguel, president and CEO of Visit Orlando reports that they “expect that last year’s record demand for hotel rooms and near record occupancy of almost 74 percent pushed TDT (tourist development tax) for the full calendar year over $200 million for the first time in Orlando history. We haven’t seen this level of occupancy since 1996, when the Cowboys beat the Steelers in Super Bowl XXX.” Convention business is coming back strong. In 2014, Visit Orlando booked more than $2 billion in future conventions.

Hyatt Regency Orlando boasts new offerings including a new seafood-focused restaurant, spa treatments catering to the business traveler, and a new kosher kitchen offering specialized menus for meetings and conventions.

The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel, located in Orlando between Epcot and Disney’s Hollywood Studios, is in the midst of the largest makeover in its history. The hotel launched a multiphase, multiyear, $125 million renovation project that will transform every guest room in the 758-room Swan Hotel and the 1,509-room Dolphin Hotel. The entire rooms project is scheduled for completion by the end of 2017. The transformation will occur without disruption of service as the majority of guest rooms will be available throughout the process. The hotel’s public spaces, restaurants, meeting rooms, shops, pools and recreational areas will not be impacted and remain fully operational throughout the renovation.

The Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo announced plans to begin construction on new meeting and function space, which is scheduled to open early February 2016. This new meeting space will feature a state-of-the-art 5,500-sf ballroom; five breakout rooms, all with natural light; a 3,000-sf interactive cooking school; and wraparound outdoor decks with breathtaking views of the marina. Total meeting facilities will then measure just under 30,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor space. The focal point of the new complex will be the interactive cooking school, which will give groups an opportunity to add a new twist to their meeting agenda. Attendees will don chefs’ hats and coats and join in on the fun of learning how to cook a fresh Florida lobster or what “Farm to Table” really means.

Palm Beach’s luxurious Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa recently partnered with Jonathan Adler to completely redesign the 309 guest rooms, which feature new exclusive furnishings designed by Adler. Inspired by its namesake spa, Eau Palm Beach Resort and Spa is situated on a private beach along the Atlantic coast. The 42,000-sf Eau Spa was just awarded five stars by Forbes Travel Guide, and is one of fewer than 50 spas around the world to earn the prestigious five-star rating. With more than 30,000 sf of meeting and event space, the resort accommodates groups from 10 to 1,000 and offers a wide variety of indoor and outdoor venues for private events.

The re-designed Sundial Beach Resort, recently named the “Best Full-Service Resort” on Sanibel and Captiva Islands, invested more than $6 million in refreshed amenities. The resort features the new Resort Centre, which is the largest meeting venue on Sanibel Island. Boasting 12,000 sf of flexible space, the center accommodates up to 300 guests and features unique outdoor event space with water views. Newly renovated meeting facilities include nine separate event rooms all with expansive golf views, a full business center and AV capabilities. Wireless Internet is available throughout all meeting rooms.

Sundial Beach Resort’s three brand new restaurants each offer their own unique culinary style and menus. Waterview lounge serves up Florida-inspired dishes in a casual setting. Enjoy the outdoor lounge area while sipping on a cocktail from the bar, which offers live music and an outside terrace. Scheduled to open in spring 2016, The Henderson, a beachfront resort hotel in Destin, Florida, will be managed by Sheila C. Johnson’s Salamander Hotels & Resorts. The 171 guest rooms and suites will include stylish furnishings, yet remain authentic to the local cultural surroundings. Larger than typical luxury resort guest rooms, the 1,500-sf room offers a dedicated meeting wing, 5,400-sf ballroom, a junior ballroom, private boardrooms and nearly 30,000 sf of outdoor group options, including oceanfront function locations.

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As a meeting destination, Nashville is hotter than a country music star with a chart-topping hit. The city’s fast-growing meeting, convention and hotel space is attracting record numbers of meetings and conventions, including many corporate groups that had never before considered Nashville.

Such companies include Experian, a global information services company. Experian will hold its first-ever meeting in Nashville in April at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, which offers 600,000 sf of meeting space. Experian’s three-day North American sales conference is expected to attract 750 attendees.

**Pleasant Surprise**

Experian began to consider Nashville at the suggestion of the company’s former CEO. “About five years ago, he asked us about meeting in Nashville,” says Laurie Touchberry, CMP, Experian’s director of corporate events. “The suggestion really surprised us, but we looked into it. We were pleasantly surprised to find that Nashville has so much more to offer than we thought as far as properties and meeting space. We liked that downtown was close and that it’s a walkable city. And I didn’t realize what a great place for food it is. We are excited. This is a whole new type of destination for us.”

Touchberry sought a property that could meet Experian’s considerable technology needs. “Most of our salespeople will have at least two devices,” she says. “We do real-time online polling during our presentations and 50 to 60 breakouts. We have to make sure people can tweet about sessions and share information online with others who couldn’t make it to the meeting.”

Experian also needed ample bandwidth for its meeting app. “The app has been pretty popular the last few years,” says Touchberry. “It offers lots of information about the meeting and breakout agenda so people can make their personalized agendas. We give them information about speakers and a map of the venue because it is huge. There’s attendee contact information so they can network before, during and after the event. We can also push out communications to attendees by email or text.”

Touchberry discussed her technology needs during her site visit. “We asked them specifically about the bandwidth and told them what our usage has been in the past,” she says. “They assured us they have enough bandwidth and gave us examples of how they met the technology needs of other corporations.”

The Experian meeting also will take advantage of Nashville’s musical heritage. “We will have a networking dinner at the Grand Ole Opry, where we will have some type of musical entertainment,” Touchberry says. “The city is so musical, we want to take advantage of that.”

The live music scene in the Broadway Historic District, a.k.a. “Honky Tonk Highway,” offers more than just country.
We were pleasantly surprised to find that Nashville has so much more to offer than we thought.

Laurie Touchberry, CMP Director of Corporate Events, Esperian, Costa Mesa, CA

We were pleasantly surprised that many people will hit the places downtown.

Record Numbers
Corporations meeting in Nashville for the first time are helping the city set records. The number of hotel rooms sold and the amount of hotel tax collected increased 48 consecutive months through 2014, according to the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. (NCVC). In October 2014, Nashville set an all-time monthly record for hotel room bookings. In addition, Nashville’s year-over-year hotel demand in November 2014 was the fastest growing in the nation, according to Smith Travel Research. Nashville’s brand is broader then just country music. (See related story on page 28.) The city now has a dual reputation – music city and top meeting destination. “We have made ourselves into a very planner user-friendly city,” says Carol Norfleet, CMP, DMCP, executive vice president and COO of Destination Nashville, a local DMC. “The Gaylord, one of the largest convention centers in the nation, gave us a downtown urban convention center. We have made ourselves into a very planner user-friendly city,” says Carol Norfleet, CMP, DMCP, executive vice president and COO of Destination Nashville, a local DMC. “The Gaylord, one of the largest convention centers in the nation, gave us a downtown urban convention center. The city’s new 2.1-million-sf, state-of-the-art convention center features a 350,000-sf exhibit hall, 60 meeting rooms and the 57,500-sf Grand Ballroom. In addition, the MCC holds LEED Gold Certification and engages in environmentally sustainable practices, including maintaining a green roof with a 200-kilowatt solar panel.

Music City Center is a prime reason why Nashville booked meetings at a record pace in 2014, according to Butch Spyridon, president and CEO of Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp., who expects to set more records in 2015. “This will probably be the fifth year in a row of record sales,” he says. “We will probably show at the end of the year that we hosted four of the largest conventions in the history of the city. We are very competitive, and we are winning more than we lose against our competitors. The MCC has enough space to attract 75-80 percent of the convention business nationwide. We feel like that’s the sweet spot.”

Nashville is especially hot in the corporate meetings sector. Norfleet says the reasons are innumerable. “We are within a day’s drive of 60 percent of the U.S. population,” she says. “We are a Southwest Airlines hub. The meeting space within hotels and the convention center is fabulous. There is a lot to do. And there are many great venues.”

Norfleet notes that the downtown music venues are popular among corporate groups. “Our biggest showcase downtown is the Wild Horse Saloon, which is three stories,” she says. “It showcases country music and other types of bands. It has the biggest dance floor in town, and there is a lot of square footage for large groups. The honky-tomks, which are everywhere you turn, keep live music going almost 24 hours a day.”

In addition, Nashville offers posh private event venues. For example, Aerial, located on Broadway, hosts up to 250 people in a stylish space with a glass-enclosed rooftop and 2,000-sf patio.

Nashville’s many recording studios also are popular venues for events, receptions and teambuilding events. “We rent the studios for groups for an afternoon or evening,” says Norfleet. “Many times, as a teambuilding exercise, we bring in songwriters to write a song with attendees and they record it on the spot.”

In addition, the food scene has exploded over the last few years. Norfleet says, “There was a time when it wasn’t a food chain or a basic restaurant, it wasn’t here,” she says. “Now we have everything from ethnic cuisine to fine dining. Celebrity chefs are starting to discover us. I keep a running list of restaurateurs I need to try. There are about 20 on the list. Most opened in the last year or will open soon.” Many of the restaurants are located within a few miles of the MCC, she adds.

Maximizing the City’s Offerings
Beachbody Inc., a Santa Monica, California-based direct sales company that markets fitness, weight loss and home-exercise DVDs, plans to take full advantage of most of Nashville’s venues. Beachbody will hold a three-day meeting for more than 20,000 distributors in Nashville this July.

The company is planning four parties for its top four tiers of distributors. “We are using the Country Music Hall of Fame for our top group, “ says Kelli Gilbert, Beachbody VIP, global events and recognition. “We don’t know who the country music entertainer will be yet. We are closing part of downtown near Sixth Street for another party, and The Wild Horse Saloon for another.” For the fourth party, Gilbert will be shutting down Second Street or Lower Broadway downtown, the heart of the live music scene known as Honky Tonk Highway. The newly expanded Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum is connected on several levels to the Omni Nashville Hotel and is across the street from the Music City Center.

Beachbody’s meeting functions will take place in Nashville’s most prominent meeting and convention sites: The MCC will host opening and closing sessions; distributor recognition events will take place at LP Field, a football stadium; and Bridgestone Arena will be the site of the general session.

There was a time when Nashville could not provide space and hotel rooms for 20,000 attendees. Not anymore. “We are contracted with about 43 hotels,” says Gilbert. “We are creating a shuttle service for guests. We have over 1,000 rooms at the Gaylord Opryland, and we are creating a separate shuttle system there for those people.”

The NCVC played a crucial role in helping Beachbody with the numerous details involved in planning such a large and complex meeting. “They have been instrumental in every decision we have made, including the vendors we selected, closing down parts of downtown, and the hotel package. They have been like a partner or extension of us. It’s the first time we have experienced that,” says Gilbert. And, she adds, “We feel like everything we are getting has been the best possible value for us.”

Beachbody selected Nashville after meeting in Las Vegas for three consecutive years at the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. “We had great experiences there but we just wanted to try something different in another part of the country,” says Gilbert. “Nashville has gotten such a good reputation, and it’s something on people’s bucket lists. It is so different from Las Vegas, but that’s what is good about it.”

Gilbert and her staff leaned toward meeting in Nashville during their site visit. “When we saw Nashville, we thought it would be one-stop shopping for us,” says Gilbert. “They had the space and availability. It’s well-positioned in the U.S. for our distributors all over the country. And we liked how much they wanted us to be there.”

The only thing that limits Nashville from attracting even more and larger meetings is sleeping room supply. The demand for rooms exceeds the supply, says Spyridon. “The biggest obstacle for us in terms of getting more business is having enough room blocks,” he says.

More rooms are on the way. Plans call for building two new hotels: The Westin Nashville Hotel and a JW Marriott —

**HOTELS GET RENOVATIONS. HILTONS GET MAKEOVERS.**

Hilton Nashville Downtown, a AAA Four-Diamond hotel nestled in the heart of “Music City,” emerges from a multi-million dollar renovation. The only all-suite full service luxury hotel in downtown Nashville unveils chic and modern upgrades to all 330 guest suites, atrium lobby, grand ballroom, meeting rooms and a landmark executive lounge. “Trattoria & Mollino will open the latest addition in Spring 2015. Call 1-866-500-5000 and book today. (See related story on page 28.)

**This will probably be the fifth year in a row of record sales. ... We are very competitive.**

Butch Spyridon, President and CEO Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.
across from the MCC. The 35-story JW Marriott hotel will be the tallest building in Nashville and will offer 500 to 600 sleeping rooms. The JW Marriott is expected to open by the end of 2017. The hotel will feature two restaurants, as well as a rooftop pool and bar. Construction of the hotel is expected to be completed by the end of 2016. In addition, plans are underway to break ground on the Virgin Nashville Hotel this spring, which will bring another 240 guest rooms to Nashville in fall 2016.

The 800-room Omni Nashville Hotel connects to the Country Music Hall of Fame and sits across from MCC. The property offers 80,000 sf of meeting space. Both the hotel and the MCC opened in September 2013. The 340-room Loews Vanderbilt Hotel has undergone renovations that include a redesigned lobby, refreshed corridors, and new public and guest bathrooms. The project also added a new Mason’s Southern brasserie-style restaurant and Mason Bar, which features live music, a nine-screen media wall and a Mason jar chandelier. The property offers 24,000 sf of meeting space.

The Hilton Nashville Downtown — the city’s only all-suite, full-service luxury downtown hotel — has completed a $32 million renovation. The renovation includes all 330 suites as part of a $32 million renovation. The hotel also improved its 17,800 sf of flexible meeting space, including the grand ballroom. In addition, the hotel has a new executive lounge complete with a grand fireplace. The AAA Four Diamond property has transformed its grand atrium lobby into a lively social space with a Nashville-inspired design that includes warm woods, polished marble and sleek metals. The lobby features a new grand circular entrance and marble floor with modern rugs and elegant but comfortable furniture that invites guests to relax and network. The renovation also transformed the Parkview Café & Lounge and MarketStreet restaurant. The entire renovation project will be complete when the Hilton Nashville introduces a Trattoria II Mulino Italian restaurant this spring.

The hotel also features The Palm Steak House, a fine-dining venue with a reputation for attracting musicians including Harry Connick Jr., Lady Antebellum and Little Richard. The Sports Grille is currently being converted to an upscale Italian restaurant. Located across the street from the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Hilton Nashville offers Wi-Fi throughout the hotel and features onsite car rental service.

The Renaissance Nashville Hotel has completed the final phase of a $12 million renovation that included its 700 guest rooms, meeting rooms and grand ballroom. The project increased the fitness center’s space by 50 percent. Renovations also included a new lobby, guest floor corridors and the addition of a Starbucks. The 673-room property offers more than 31,000 sf of meeting space.

The 28-story Sheraton Nashville Downtown Hotel is undergoing a $25 million makeover. The renovation includes all 482 guest rooms; a brand new lobby featuring a floating wooden staircase; a 25-story glass chandelier; and custom seating areas. The property has 25,000 sf of meeting space.

The Sheraton Music City Hotel, which offers a resort-like setting, has refreshed its fitness center. Complimentary airport transportation is available. The 410-room property offers 35,000 sf of meeting space.

Any planner who still views Nashville as simply a great place for country music doesn’t know the destination. “There is not enough time to do everything you want to do in Nashville,” says Norfleet. “The hardest decision is what to leave out.”
On The Move

Suzanne Taylor was named regional director of sales and marketing for four Heritage Hotels & Resorts properties in Santa Fe, New Mexico: the Eldorado Hotel & Spa, Hotel Chimayo de Santa Fe, Hotel St. Francis and the Lodge at Santa Fe. She most recently served as the director of sales and marketing for the Hilton Santa Fe Historic Plaza.

Aaron Misner was named regional director of accounts for Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas, responsible for the Northeast region. He formerly served as account manager in the Northeast territory for the Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board.

Jon Chocklett was named as vice president of sales and business development for The Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. He was director of sales and marketing for The Mandarin Oriental in Washington, DC.

The Hilton Chicago/Oak Brook Hills Resort & Conference Center in Oak Brook, Illinois, has appointed Nathan Karsten as director of sales and marketing. He formerly served as director of sales and marketing for the Millennium Knickerbocker Hotel Chicago.

Francis W. Purvey was named director of sales and marketing for Sonesta Fort Lauderdale in Florida. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing for The Shores Resort & Spa in Daytona Beach, Florida.

One Ocean Resort & Spa in Atlantic Beach, Florida, has promoted Jeanne Borthwell to associate director of sales. She most recently served as group sales manager at the resort.

Julie Branstrom was named director of sales and marketing for Gateway Canyons Resort & Spa, Gateway, Colorado. She was executive director of sales and travel agencies at Devil’s Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa, Tabernash, Colorado.

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