Golf & Spa Resorts
Where Shared Experiences Are Good for Business
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Meetings by the Beach
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Keith Roher, president of Zeno Office Solutions, a division of Xerox, at Streamsong Resort in Central Florida.
My love affair with food in Europe started before I stepped off the ship.

Embark on a culinary journey where up to 12 distinctive restaurants—each with a vibe as appealing as the cuisines they serve—will please your impeccable sense of taste. Paired with the fact that every dish is prepared fresh from scratch, it's no wonder your favorite restaurant in Europe will be one of ours.

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Shared Experiences

Ever notice how things tend to come full circle? How everything old is new again but with a new and more sophisticated name? Way back when, an afternoon on the golf course was simply described as “having a great time” all the while we conducted business, developed and cemented relationships, and learned how to work together as a team. Nowadays, we call it “shared experiences,” or sometimes “experiential learning,” etc., etc. But, no matter how you define it, the key message in our cover story “Golf & Spa Resorts — Where Shared Experiences Are Good for Business” (page 16) remains the same: A relaxing afternoon on the golf course or any other recreational teambuilding exercise often boosts productivity as attendees take the time to refresh and renew before they head back to the job at hand.

For example, Keith Roher, who is pictured on our cover this month on the golf course at Streamsong Resort, found out firsthand how well his sales force responded to Zeno Office Solutions’ annual sales kickoff meeting held in February at the golf resort in Central Florida. Roher, the president of Zeno, a division of Xerox, wanted the reps “to drop their shoulders, relax and have fun.” He said the meeting at Streamsong was “a chance for attendees to get to know some of the other reps around the state that they don’t see on an everyday basis.” Lo and behold, Roher said the reps got all “fired up,” and a significant ROI was achieved: “The message that we were trying to convey directly related to 2015 and our expectations from the sales side. And we had our biggest first quarter in probably three years.”

What if golf or spa doesn’t fit with your group at this time? Check out the great success stories from your fellow planners in “Meetings by the Beach: From Tropical Paradises to Floating Venues — Reward Your Incentive Winners With the Ultimate Retreat” on page 26 and “Meeting in the Mountains: Now Is a Great Time to Find the Best Options and Values for Wintertime Events” on page 54.

As site selection is a recurring theme in this issue, be sure to also review all the fabulous locales in “Top Value Destinations: Great Places, Great People and More Bang for the Buck” on page 60. Lastly, look into “Going Mobile” on page 48 for all the compelling reasons you need a meeting app for your next event.
**News & Notes**

**AMResorts Breaks Ground on Now Onyx Punta Cana Resort in the Dominican Republic**

The 500-room resort will be located in the Uvero Alto region of Punta Cana. The property boasts outstanding views of the Caribbean Sea and access to a pristine white sand beach, next to sister property Breathless Punta Cana Resort & Spa.

All Now properties feature AMResorts’ Unlimited-Luxur concept, which includes: premium accommodations, multiple gourmet à la carte and specialty dining restaurants; 24-hour room and concierge service; pool and beach wait service; world-class spa facilities; and unlimited international and domestic beverages and top-shelf spirits.

**2015 Site Classic Now Scheduled for The Paradisus Playa Del Carmen La Perla on the Riviera Maya**

Chicago, IL — The SITE Foundation announced that the destination for the 2015 SITE Classic, September 27–30 has been relocated from Baha Mar, Nassau, Bahamas to the Paradisus Playa del Carmen La Perla on the Riviera Maya in Mexico. The Classic is the SITE Foundation’s premier fundraising initiative, and this year’s event is already sold out.

“At the completion of the resort going on through the summer, we mutually agreed with Baha Mar management that it would be best for Baha Mar to host this prestigious event next year,” stated Kurt Paben, president, SITE Foundation and president, channel and employee loyalty for Aimia. “It is important to our sponsors and guests to stay with the original dates of September 27–30, so we made the decision to relocate the event, SITE appreciates and values our partnership with Baha Mar and supports their commitment to delivering an unprecedented luxury destination resort. We have already confirmed that the SITE Classic will take place at Baha Mar in 2016,” Paben added.

Part of the luxury, all-inclusive Paradisus Resort brand by Meliá Hotels International, the Paradisus Playa del Carmen La Perla, an adult-only resort located on a stunning private bay, is recognized as one of the most luxurious hotels on the Riviera Maya. The resort provides a breathtaking Caribbean setting with world-class facilities, including YHI spa treatments, 11 world-class restaurants and modern, meeting spaces with state-of-the-art technology.

**IRF’s Incentive Invitational Marks Record Attendance**

**MIA MI, FL — The Incentive Research Foundation’s (IRF) 22nd annual Incentive Invitational was held May 27–31 at the Trump National Doral Miami. The event marked a return to the Doral, the very first venue where the invitational was held. This year, guests enjoyed the luxurious results of a $250 million restoration of the property — as well as outstanding keynote presenters and insights into three new research studies. The 2015 Invitational featured the largest attendance to date, with more than 200 incentive travel buyers who represented more than 60,000 corporate meetings and incentive travel events among the 420 participants. IRF sponsorships sold out five weeks in advance for the first time in the event’s history. The Incentive Invitational is the IRF’s most important annual fundraising activity for research surrounding motivation and incentives. “This outpouring of enthusiastic participation has even exceeded our high expectations for the invitational,” said Melissa Van Dyke, president, Incentive Research Foundation. “It provides a valuable opportunity for people to cultivate new relationships and solidify existing business contacts — as well as benefit from exciting new research and collaborations.” One of the key components of the Incentive Invitational is a slate of educational sessions that highlight recent IRF research and provide actionable, usable data on incentives and motivation. Attendees also had the opportunity to relate the research to their own experiences and practices through roundtable discussions. During the Education Day sessions, findings of three new research papers were previewed: “Insights into the Changing Role of DMCs,” “Insights into the Changing Role of Procurement,” and “Motivating Multiple Generations.” The keynote discussions were led by Mike Walsh, CEO of Tomorrow, a global consultancy on designing business for the 21st century, Daniel Leidl, PhD, director of organizational development and human capital at PRG, and John Bukaty, a popular American artist. The full papers are slated to be released to the public later this year. www.theirf.org **The Meeting Magazines.com** **Corporate & Incentive Travel** **June 2015**
The Mayflower Hotel Will Join the Autograph Collection
WASHINGTON, DC — The Mayflower, one of DC’s most storied properties and a Washington original since 1925, is declaring its independence as of July 1, 2015. Refreshed with a $20 million room renovation, innovative culinary enhancements at Edgar Bar + Kitchen, and signature experiences, The Mayflower will join the Autograph Collection, Marriott International’s exclusive portfolio of hotels recognized for celebrating individuality.

The Mayflower completed its final top-to-bottom renovation, with all 583 rooms and 74 suites undergoing a stylish makeover. The hotel also will offer increased bandwidth as well as “smart thermostats” with a chip embedded in the guest’s key card, which communicates with the AC unit when the room is occupied in order to adjust accordingly. Edgar Bar + Kitchen will be introducing "Mayflower Mornings by Edgar," a quick and tasty grab-and-go breakfast option, including the hotel’s famed banana bread.

The Westin Denver International Airport to Open November 19
DENVER, CO — Denver International Airport (DIA) and The Westin announced that it will officially open The Westin Denver International Airport, Denver’s newest world-class hotel and conference center, at 3 p.m. on November 19, 2015. The 433,000-sf, 14-story hotel, with 519 guest rooms, will serve travelers at the fifth busiest airport in the United States.

The hotel is part of Denver’s new Hotel and Transit Center program. The floor-to-ceiling windows, which make up the entire wall of every one of the 519 guest rooms and 35 suites, offer expansive views. The 37,000-sf conference center will feature a grand ballroom, junior ballroom and 15 additional meeting/boardrooms, for a total of 19 meeting rooms. The meeting space also boasts a 10,000-sf prefunction area that showcases a panoramic three-story, floor-to-ceiling glass wall. In addition to the hotel and conference center, there will be an 82,000-sf, open-air public place that will become Denver’s newest venue for entertainment and relaxation, and will create a community connection between the airport and downtown Denver through special event programming.

New Owners of DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at Sea World Plan Renovations and Expanded Meeting Space
NEW YORK, NY — AWH Partners LLC in partnership with Building and Land Technology announced the off-market acquisition of the 1,004-room DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at Sea World. The firms plan to add value through extensive renovations to guest rooms, meeting space, public areas and resort grounds, and will add approximately 30,000 sf of upgraded facilities and premier ballroom space to enhance the hotel’s conference center. AWH Development will oversee the renovations, and Spire Hospitality will manage operations under a franchise agreement with Hilton Worldwide.

Currently featuring 60,000 sf of meeting and event space, the resort presents a myriad of choices for group business combined with leisure travel. DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at Sea World has an in-house, top-of-the-line AV and IT service team. The partnership’s planned addition of space at the resort’s conference center will significantly expand capacity for meetings and events, featuring 30,000 sf in several large ballrooms, an outdoor event pavilion and prefunction spaces.

The Meeting Magazines.com • Corporate & Incentive Travel • June 2015
The Future of Event-space Design

As meeting and event planners, it is our responsibility to stay current with trends, whether it’s colors, themes, décor elements, culinary creations or technology. Right now, it’s the constantly evolving technology that is most rapidly changing how we design events. We still consider designing for a physical space and location, but now we also design for unique spaces that social media provides, which aims toward a more personalized event experience — incorporating physical and virtual environments.

Personalize Unique Spaces

Clients are choosing spaces that relate to their brand or identity. Why not hold a fundraiser for the local university on the school’s football field or basketball court? Perhaps hold a gala for the local public library at the library. Clients are choosing unique spaces that social media provides, which aims toward a more personalized event experience — incorporating physical and virtual environments.

Use Interactive Décor

Interactive décor will play a key role for event spaces moving forward. Events are moving from “cocktail hour/sit-down, dinner/entertainment” to interactive, networking-focused environments. Floral centerpieces are being replaced with extravagant floral walls that serve as design elements, while creating space within a space. Lounge spaces include throw pillows that coordinate with table linens. Ambience is enhanced by the unexpected, such as suspend desserts from the ceiling or hanging appetizers on a wall, doubling as décor components. With guests having so many diet restrictions and food allergies, food stations become interactive with do-it-yourself menus. Guests can pick and choose their own ingredients to customize food pairings to their personal palates.

Continually Review & Refresh

Moving forward, how do event professionals keep up with trends, forecast what is coming and provide our clients with innovative and successful parties. One way is to seek opportunities to collaborate and share ideas with others in the field. So, in that spirit of collaboration, I went to my friend, the incredibly talented, Lenny Talarico, CSP, director of events for MGM Resorts Events Productions, who also oversees the seasonal design of The International School of Hospitality’s Special Events Design Lab. Lenny is renowned for producing the most cutting-edge event experiences from year-to-year for his clients.

With the demanding schedules many of us face, and the unwelcomed trend of shorter planning windows, we might have a tendency to repeat what we just did. However, Lenny cautions that when we do the same old thing, the event experience for attendees suffers and we lose because we now lack innovation.

“What I like to stress upon planners and partners is to continually review their event objectives and say, how do we still achieve those by going a different route?” he said. “Perhaps that traditional plated awards dinner can still achieve its goal by being on a flow, or in a nightclub or a venue that offers something totally unexpected.”

If It Isn’t Broke, Break It

According to Lenny, reviewing, refreshing and changing direction serves us in multiple ways. We aren’t resting on our laurels by doing the same event in another color. We are creating excitement and a buzz for attendees with a sense of anticipation, pushing them (and ourselves) out of the comfort zone. As Lenny would say, “If it isn’t broke, break it. You may be surprised by what evolves.”

Keep Up With Trends & Experiences

As we evolve, so do our customers, the environments in which we work and the industries we rely on for support. The goal is to be at the forefront of what is emerging now to provide clients the best available. If you are not seeking out what’s happening at events everywhere you are missing out. If you are not attending trade shows and conventions, even those outside of your core business, you are missing out. According to Lenny, clients want to create event experiences that communicate their business mission, or replicate their lifestyle.

To know what that experience is, you need to immerse yourself in their world, understand their goals and objectives and offer the most current solutions...or face failure,” he said. “You can’t do that unless you are out and engaged in the industry at all times. Make a habit of functioning with your antennas up all times to catch the latest trends as they come.”

Kate Patay, CPCE

is the Executive Director of Sales and Marketing for Creative Coverings, a national linen rental and sales company. Patay helps represent Creative Coverings as the NACE National Secretary/Treasurer, a NACE National Business Partner and Social Media & Trend Expert. She is an active member of ISES, ICA, ACCP, ARA, EPA, and is on the advisory board of The Solace Tree. She also is a faculty member at The International School of Hospitality in Las Vegas. Patay has been a guest speaker at numerous conventions and organizational meetings around the country. She was recently awarded the 2015 Pacesetter Award from the Convention Industry Council.

Perspective

By Kate Patay, CPCE

“If you are not seeking out what’s happening at events everywhere you are missing out.”
First-, Second- and Third-tier Cities: What Do the Designations Really Mean?

When thinking about meeting destinations, there is just about every type and size: from major convention hubs to smaller, boutique style cities. The key for meeting planners, is finding the right fit for their specific meeting. Oftentimes, you might hear a planner say that their annual meetings are only held in first-tier destinations. Or that a specific destination is a second-tier city. What specifications determine whether a city is a first-, second- or third-tier destination?

Defining tiers in the meetings industry has been a topic often discussed, yet not a lot of substantial research has been conducted to help define and clarify them. We do know that there are descriptions, not designations, and descriptions are subject to perception. Unfortunately, some of the perceptions or assumptions planners make could keep them from a great destination find.

Whereas hotels have a rating system that awards three, four or five stars to properties based on their quality, size, services and amenities, no such system exists for rating meeting destinations. While there are some common tier realties, there is a lot of gray area when defining tiers. And in that gray area, there are many advantages planners can explore.

When looking at different destinations in which to hold your meeting, you should be able to ascertain the many distinguishing attributes of each tier as well as the advantages each tier offers, which may spur you on to consider a few destinations not previously on your radar.

Here’s what we currently know about destination tiers:

1. An official list with specific tier qualifications doesn’t exist.
2. There are general characteristics or attributes that apply to each tier.
3. A first-tier destination to one planner may be a second-tier to another planner.
4. Tiers do not denote quality or services.

Don’t let tier designations define what destinations you consider. While second- and third-tier cities might be known for being more affordable, there are still plenty of affordable options in first-tier destinations, especially if you are flexible with dates. Additionally, second- and third-tier destinations, depending on the meeting size, can offer just about everything a first-tier destination can. The key is keeping your own meeting objectives in mind first and then understanding how destinations, regardless of tier, will be the perfect complement.

Convene magazine recently conducted a survey of meeting planners, which is the source for the following material. One of the questions asked was, “What attributes must be present for you to consider a destination a first-, second- or third-tier meeting destination?” Based upon the responses, there are general attributes that can be applied to each tier.

Essential Attributes of a First-tier Destination

First-tier destinations might be the easiest to define. They are typically the biggest convention cities in the country such as Chicago, Las Vegas, Orlando, etc. While each of these cities is very different in terms of size and location, there are certain characteristics they all have in common such as:

- Airport with ample nonstop national and international access (69 percent).
- Hotel inventory that includes major hotel brands (60 percent).
- Abundant dining, entertainment and attraction options for attendees (57 percent).
- 10,000 minimum commitable sleeping rooms (47 percent).
- Convention center with a minimum of 500,000 gross sf of exhibit space (44 percent).
- Considered one of the top 25 destinations for group business (43 percent).
- Distinctive leisure-travel appeal (37 percent).

Other measurable first-tier attributes include:

- Major metropolitan hub.
- Strong destination travel infrastructure in place (rail, public transportation, taxis).
- Reputation for world-class services and amenities.

Essential Attributes of a Second-tier Destination

We know first-tier destinations are fairly easy to identify based upon certain measurable attributes (size, airport, airlift, etc.). But how do you measure and/or perceive what is a second-tier or third-tier destination? This is where it gets a bit more challenging.
little more complicated. Often, a destination is categorized to be a second-tier destination simply because of its size, and thus may also be perceived as being more affordable.

• Affordable, better value (59 percent).
• Attracts a regional drive market (49 percent).
• Convention facilities with less than 500,000 gross sf (36 percent).
• Regional airport with less nonstop or direct airlift (36 percent).
• Largest convention venue generally a single hotel or conference center (32 percent).
• Productive local industries and business climate (32 percent).

While a second-tier destination may not have a lot of international airlift, 10,000 committable hotel rooms or large meeting/exhibit space, it doesn’t mean that these destinations don’t have world-class meeting facilities and amenities.

Essential Attributes of a Third-tier Destination

The key is not to consider a third-tier destination as being third-class as it really is just based on the size of the city and its convention offerings, not quality or even cost. For example, some of the most luxurious resorts are located in destinations considered third-tier, simply because of the destination size.

Measurable attributes include:
• Regional airport with less nonstop or direct airlift (37 percent).
• Largest convention venue generally a single hotel or conference center (20 percent).
• Convention facilities less than 500,000 gross sf (16 percent).
• Attracts a regional drive market (13 percent).
• Distinctive leisure travel appeal.

Often, third-tier destinations are the choice for incentive travel and find themselves competing for the business along with first- and second-tier destinations.

How Do You Find the Right Destination?

The key is understanding the strengths and attributes each tier represents. Do you want your medium-sized convention to feel like the “big fish” in a destination? If yes, go with a second- or third-tier destination. Or, what if you have a small meeting but need the convenience of a large international airlift? A first-tier destination might be the best fit. The key is to look at each destination with fresh eyes and determine how it can work for you.

Also, empowerMINT.com’s Destination Finder is an invaluable tool, and empowerMINT.com helps planners search and compare meeting needs across multiple destinations.

Suppose your meeting requires the flexible travel options of a first-tier destination, but the accommodations of a second-tier destination? Or you are looking for a high-end meeting experience but in a smaller, more intimate destination? That’s where the experts at the convention and visitors bureaus (CVB) can help.

The CVB sales professionals are the best first point of contact to help planners find the right fit for any size or type of meeting. They offer a comprehensive view of the destination, local expertise, extensive in-market relationships and more. CVB services are free to meeting planners.

To research destinations, find out what’s new and connect to CVB experts at more than 145 top meeting destinations.

"Don’t let tier designations define what destinations you consider."

Christine ‘Shimo’ Shimasaki, CDME, CMP

is Managing Director of empowerMINT.com and E.I.C. Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI). She joined DMAI in 2009. Previously, Shimasaki served as E.V.P. and chief strategy officer for the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau. She has served the tourism industry as a board member of PCMA, co-chair of the Performance Measures Initiative for DMAI and chair to DMAI’s Accreditation Board. Currently, she serves on the Convention Industry Council’s APEX Standards Review Committee as chair of eRFP Efficiencies Workgroup and is authoring the Event Room Demand Study, quantifying for the first time the volume of rooms booked outside the contracted room block.
Luxury Meets Wild Kingdom

The recreational amenities of Streamsong Resort, located in the lush, natural environs surrounding the town of Bowling Green in Central Florida, made quite a first impression on the 60-plus sales representatives of Zeno Office Solutions when the company held its annual sales kick-off meeting at the resort in February.

Keith Roher, president of Zeno, a division of Xerox, describes the luxury property as “the Ritz-Carlton meets Wild Kingdom” and notes that the hilly terrain, partly manmade from land recovered from a former phosphate mine, gives the Florida-based group a sense that they’re out of state.

“Central Florida is pancake flat and all of a sudden at Streamsong Blue’s first hole you’re 150 feet in the air where the tee box is. It gives you a really cool panoramic view in the direction of both sides of the state,” he describes.

Streamsong Red and Blue were ranked No. 1 and 3, respectively, as the “Best Public Golf Courses in Florida” by Golf Digest this year. In the fall of 2017, they will be complemented by Streamsong Black, designed by Gil Hanse, architect of The Olympic Golf Course in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and co-designer of Castle Stuart Golf Links in Scotland. Yet Streamsong offers many other ways to enjoy its scenic location, including bass fishing, sporting clays, nature trails, tennis and an infinity pool.

Inside, attendees can rejuvenate in AcquaPietra, the resort’s European-style spa, and choose from three restaurants, including a fine steak house, sophisticated Italian restaurant and a casual American eatery.

Keith Roher, president of Zeno Office Solutions, plans to start holding quarterly golf outings for Zeno clients at Streamsong Resort.

Some of the most successful corporate meetings mix business and pleasure in ways that are actually good for business, and great resorts enable planners to achieve that effect. When attendees partake of a resort’s recreational amenities, they are not merely getting a break from business. They are refreshing themselves, which tends to improve attention and productivity at the next session. They are often socializing with other attendees, whether at the golf course, tennis court or spa, which can promote cohesiveness among coworkers. And they are building memories of a great overall meeting, which is exactly the impression planners want attendees to leave with.
After that positive first experience with Streamsong and a kickoff that got all the reps "fired up," Roher notes evidence that a significant ROI was achieved. "The message that we were trying to convey directly related to 2015 and our expectations from the sales side.

"Being that they built (Streamsong) in the last few years, it's got the latest and greatest, so that made everything go very smoothly."

Keith Roher, President
Zeno Office Solutions, a Xerox Company, Tampa, FL

And we had our biggest first quarter in probably three years; traditionally the first quarter for us is soft." Roher also plans to start holding quarterly golf outings at Streamsong with some of Zeno’s current and potential clients in Florida.

On the Ball at Kingsmill
Meetings at golf and spa resorts can certainly be conducive to a strong business focus, and another fine example is Greene, New York-based Raymond Corporation, a global provid- er of material handling solutions. "The meeting aspect of it is very important to us. We look at IACC-certified facilities for that very reason, to make sure the meeting space is adequate, that everything is ergonomically correct, that the AV is good, and so on."

Kingsmill’s staff also was very adept at fulfilling the event’s logistical needs, Montalvo adds. "Many of our workshops are tailored to go in certain directions, but they can change, so there are times when we are changing room dynamics on the fly. And they were very accommodating in that regard, they did a great job of giving us space that we weren’t allocat- ing at one point for additional planning sessions. From a meeting perspective they were on the ball." The AAA Four Diamond, 425-room resort offers a 16,000-sf conference center.

On the less formal side, business objectives also were achieved. "The second level of this (program) is the learning process continuing in the even- ning, and the Kingsmill has all of those nooks and crannies where people can network and talk about best practices. Of course the golf courses come into play there as well," Montalvo explains. Kingsmill offers two public 18-hole courses, the River Course and Plantation Course, complemented by a new, million-dollar spa with views of the James River.

On the Ocean Down East
Golf and spa are two amenities that often serve as touchstones for attendees:

“the resort experience they were used to in the Caribbean,” White says. The Samoset’s golf course celebrated its cen- tennial in 2002, and its spa is designed to reflect the coastal Maine environment. "We held tea times each morning attend- ees could sign up for, and those were always filled," she adds. The property houses 178 accommodations and more than 20,000 sf of function space, includ- ing the 6,000-sf Knox County Ballroom.

Even when groups venture to an unfa- miliar destination or resort, they will get a sense of comfort from the pres- ence of these well-known recreational options. Maryville, Tennessee-based Clayton Homes, for example, had almost always taken incentive groups to the Caribbean, but for their latest program, upper management decided to "look at unique domestic destinations that may- be their people haven’t been to before," explains Erica White, account executive at Knoxville-based Liaison Meetings & Incentives, who planned the program. The chosen destination was the coastal town of Rockport, Maine, home to Samoset Resort on Penobscot Bay.

While an oceanfront property, the AAA Four Diamond resort is quite a de- parture from the Caribbean locales the group was accustomed to. Nonetheless, its golf and spa amenities gave attendees "the resort experience they were used to in the Caribbean," White says. The Samoset’s golf course celebrated its cen- tennial in 2002, and its spa is designed to reflect the coastal Maine environment. "We held tea times each morning attend- ees could sign up for, and those were always filled," she adds. The property houses 178 accommodations and more than 20,000 sf of function space, includ- ing the 6,000-sf Knox County Ballroom. Activities for the 230 guests included a welcome reception with a lobster bake and yard games such as croquet, schoo- ner sailings and a farewell evening at the Cellardoor Winery. "We set up dinner and dancing out in the huge lawn area between the winery building and the vineyard," White relates. "The only issue is that the winery has a 9 p.m. noise ordi- nance, so no music is allowed after 9 p.m."

"By the end of the program, every person came up to me and said how amaz- ing the experience was and that this was an area of the United States that they would have never seen if it wasn’t for this program," she says. "It has in- spired Clayton Homes to look at more domestic locations in unique areas of the United States."

The Ins and Outs of the Boulders
One part of the country that plan- ners often look to for great golf and spa resorts is Arizona, whose dry climate and picturesque desert terrains lend themselves to these activities. Boulders Resort & Spa in Carefree worked as a fine treat for sales representatives of Santa Clara, California-based Gigamon. "One of the reasons we chose the Boulders is its location; we want everyone to concentrate on our meeting and don’t
“By the end of the program, every person came up to me and said how amazing the experience was and that this was an area of the United States that they would have never seen if it wasn’t for this program.”

Erica White, Account Executive
Liaison Meetings & Incentives, Knoxville, TN

want too much distraction,” comments Anna Moraleda, global event planner for the network visibility solutions developer. The site choice is a proven one, as Gigamon held its sales kickoff at the resort for the fourth time this January. The globally based attendees broke off into foursomes for a shotgun-start golf tournament at one of the Boulders’ two 18-hole courses, and competed for prizes in traditional events such as closest to the pin and longest drive. In addition, “many of the ladies in my group used the spa, including myself. I love that you can decompress at the spa after a stressful event,” Moraleda says.

While the Spa at the Boulders is formidable at 33,000 sf, the resort also is well-stocked in indoor and outdoor function space. The 50,000 sf includes the 17,800-sf Tohono Conference Center, with flexible floor plans. “One of the things I love about the Boulders is their flexibility of meeting space, so we had several outdoor events,” Moraleda says. In addition, “our general session room and a couple of the other meeting rooms we used had natural lighting.” Attendees also were invigorated by the cuisine, which “is not your typical hotel food; it’s not greasy and is geared toward healthy living,” she adds. “Many of my attendees are very health-conscious.” The F&B staff also is very resourceful in terms of providing varied culinary experiences. “We did Argentinian food this year because we’re going there for the incentive trip, and then the year prior to that, we did a Great Gatsby theme, so they created dishes that were popular in the 1920s.”

Ojai Valley Oasis
The Topa Topa mountain range forms a dramatic backdrop to the 308-room Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, a AAA Five Diamond property situated on 220 acres about 60 miles north of Los Angeles. The legendary inn features a George C. Thomas-designed golf course and a Spa Village, home to the 31,000-sf Spa Ojai. The spa recently paved a new road to wellness with the introduction of cocoon-like Somadomes, personal meditation pods that use LED color therapy, binaural beat meditation and microcrystalline tiles to induce enhanced levels of relaxation. For attendees who prefer a more low-tech approach to wellness, spa guests also can experience a signature treatment at the Spa Ojai’s salon. The spa’s holistic approach extends to its fitness programming, where guests can participate in classes such as yoga, Pilates, and meditation.

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The inspiring natural surroundings at the Boulders Resort & Spa in Carefree, Arizona, enhance both golf and spa experiences.
Valley Inn Spa offers a total of 35,000 sq ft of total function space plus an Old West-inspired outdoor venue, Sunset Point.

Also new to the resort is an adults-only pool and lounge, with a spacious VIP cabana. A new signature Italian & Courtyard — formerly Neff Lounge — was refreshed, and its newly expanded 1923-era Wallace Neff Heritage Bar was its golf course,” she explains. The Wigwam Bar “I try to get the group outside for all their meals. Our meeting is in February, and my CEO and I are from the Midwest, so it’s very nice to get out there and see the flowers and enjoy the outdoors,” says Hennessy. Groups that really want to feel close to nature can gather at Sunset Point, an Old West-inspired outdoor venue with a panoramic desert backdrop, or an events lawn that accommodates up to 300 guests.

The resort has recently completed a $15 million renovation that updated its interior design scheme with a Southwestern color palette and motifs, as well as historic photography and Arizona artifacts. Guest rooms also have been upgraded with new custom furnishings, granite-top vanities in the bathrooms and more. “The feedback we got from some of the attendees was that the property was a little dated,” notes Hennessy, so the renovation is a welcome development. Red’s Bar & Grill, celebrating its 85th anniversary, also debuted new décor and furniture in February.

Entertaining Talking Stick

Last November, Scottsdale’s 496-room Talking Stick Resort, an enterprise of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, completed an expansion of its casino-level lounge, Palo Verde. The new venue’s upper level features LED staircases, oversized couches, coral tables and seating for more than 100 guests. It also features a second full bar and deejay booth for live entertainment. The Talking Stick Resort Golf Club, adjacent to the resort, is one of Arizona’s finest golf courses, coral tables and seating for more than 100 guests. It also features a second full bar and deejay booth for live entertainment. The Talking Stick Resort Golf Club, adjacent to the resort, is one of Arizona’s finest golf courses, the Gold, Patriot and Heritage. The first two courses, designed by the latter two activities during leadership meetings at the Wigwam in Phoenix. But golf is still a prominent feature of the programs, given that out of 90 attendees, about 35 are golfers, notes Tina Hennessy, executive assistant to the CEO at Belden, a manufacturer of networking, connectivity and cable products. “My CEO is an avid golfer, so oftentimes when a property is selected, the determining factor would be their golf course,” she explains. The Wigwam certainly delivers on this front with three 18-hole championship courses, the Gold, Patriot and Heritage.

Beyond Golf at the Wigwam

Arizona’s resorts are known for many outdoor activities beyond golf, in particular hot-air ballooning, horseback riding and jeep tours. St. Louis, Missouri-based Belden Inc. offered the latter two activities during leadership approach to wellness, there’s full moon yoga and personal mandala sessions. Also new to the resort is an adults-only pool and lounge, with a spacious VIP cabana. A new signature Italian & Courtyard — formerly Neff Lounge — was refreshed, and its newly expanded 1923-era Wallace Neff Heritage Bar was its golf course,” she explains. The Wigwam Bar “I try to get the group outside for all their meals. Our meeting is in February, and my CEO and I are from the Midwest, so it’s very nice to get out there and see the flowers and enjoy the outdoors,” says Hennessy. Groups that really want to feel close to nature can gather at Sunset Point, an Old West-inspired outdoor venue with a panoramic desert backdrop, or an events lawn that accommodates up to 300 guests.

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exclusive Ocean Reef Club, situated on 2,500 tropical acres in the upper-most of Florida’s chain of islands south of Miami. The resort updated its 30,000 sf of meeting space with new carpet and wall finishings along with new in-ceiling AV. Newly added were a 12,000-sf spa, the new Beach Grill casual lunch spot on Buccaneer Island, and a golf academy with digital coaching software. The 36-hole golf course received some touch-ups including new Bermuda grass and an expanded chipping/putting practice area.

The Ocean Reef Club will debut new meeting and function space in early February 2016. The 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 related team-building programs; and wraparound outdoor decks with breathtaking views of the marina.

The private, full-service resort, which boasts its own private airstrip, has a range of accommodations that include 175 inn rooms, 100 spacious one-, two- and three-bedroom villas, and private homes. The resort also offers a range of group activities beyond golf and spa: Angling aficionados can experience deep-sea, flats, reef or back-country fishing off the shores of the resort, which features a 175-slip marina. Other group activities can include chartered yacht dinners, beachside events, tent, but as conversation-starters among attendees. The formality of a general session or training workshop seldom puts participants at ease to really get to know their colleagues, but sharing time on the golf course, refreshments by the pool, or an evening entertainment experience can foster a camaraderie that translates to a better working relationship.

Keith Rohrer, for example, perceives the meeting at Streamsong as “a chance for attendees to get to know some of the other reps around the state that they don’t see on an everyday basis.” Why not optimize that opportunity with a setting that lets attendees bond over various experiences outside of the conference room? Apart from communicating sales goals and business direction for the coming year, “I wanted everyone to drop their shoulders, relax and have fun,” Rohrer asserts.

Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida, a private enclave on 2,500 acres, features a new 12,000-sf spa, 36-hole golf course and golf academy, and a range of group activities.

“My CEO is an avid golfer, so oftentimes when a property is selected, the determining factor would be their golf course.”

Tina Hennessy, Executive Assistant to the CEO
Belden Inc., St. Louis, MO

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Tina Hennessy, Executive Assistant to the CEO
Belden Inc., St. Louis, MO

“Shared Experiences”

Even at resorts known primarily for their golf and spa amenities, there are typically many other recreational options, not to mention some of the country’s best restaurants. A business-centric way to view these numerous amenities is not as distractions from meeting content, but as conversation-starters among attendees. The formality of a general session or training workshop seldom puts participants at ease to really get to know their colleagues, but sharing time on the golf course, refreshments by the pool, or an evening entertainment experience can foster a camaraderie that translates to a better working relationship.

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Meetings
by the Beach

From Tropical Paradises to Floating Venues — Reward Your Incentive Winners With the Ultimate Retreat

By Sara Churchville

For many meeting planners, the allure of an incentive trip by or, in some cases, on the sea is not only the obvious appeal of a tropical paradise for attendees, but also how surprisingly convenient some getaways are to reach. “You almost felt like a celebrity,” says Jamie Morton, event planner for Tech Data Corporation, of her time at Little Torch Key. “One morning I had breakfast in the restaurant. I like my coffee a certain way, and the next day I had it exactly that way — from a different server,” she marvels.

Morton brought a group of 33 for a sales incentive meeting in September 2014. She chose the location because it completely unplug, “You’re actually connecting with other people, engaging. It’s a freeing experience.”

The attendees had free time for fishing, snorkeling and receiving spa treatments, with group dinners each night and a brunch spread on the final day. The resort offers dining in the restaurant, by the pool or in the room, as well as the group dinner location on the beach. “It was private, just for us,” Morton says. “And they were still able with décor and linens to make it feel different each night.” One special guest who strolled in the kelp forest, a Maine specialty, “It’s a little awkward since you have to sit, and the schooner is a little rocky,” she notes.) Diamond’s Edge has a private space for up to 55 people as well as its own dock. The attendees enjoyed again, the dates she needed weren’t available. With 30 available suites, the space can quickly fill up.

She recommends that planners who are considering the resort make it clear to attendees just how unplugged they will be. She also counsels taking advantage of the resort’s optional meal plan; à la carte can work out to be more expensive. Morton also notes that attendees who arrive with someone other than a romantic partner might find the accommodations a bit awkward — in some instances, she had to find rollout beds.

Morton notes that the planning process, from contract through execution, was seamless and the service “phenomenal. I was blown away by the staff, and the food was fantastic.”

Local Color
Melissa O’Connor, event manager for PC Connection’s sales support and marketing division, brought her incentive group of 45 to the 61-room Inn by the Sea in Crescent Beach, Cape Elizabeth, Maine, this past September. Like Morton, she was in part drawn to its proximity. “It’s semi-local,” she notes, only about three hours from the company’s main headquarters in Merrimack, New Hampshire. She also was drawn to “the uniqueness of the inn, the setting right on the bay. It’s a nice relaxing getaway for the weekend that’s more beachy than any of the Portland venues.”

O’Connor looks for the local touch for her events and this one was replete with it: kettle corn, a Maine specialty, made at the inn; a lobster ornament used as the do-not-disturb sign; and a trip on a “very old sailboat” from the Portland Schooner Company to Great Diamond Island for dinner at Dia-

Land & Sea Tours rented trolley for port to “the uniqueness of the inn, the set-

ny’s headquarters in Clearwater, Florida and a 30-minute drive from Key West International Airport to Little Torch Key. The resort, which is only accessible by boats that run every half-hour, each way from morning to sunset, provides a front desk check-in station in Little Torch Key. The resort gives you a transfer before boarding to start your journey away from reality,” Morton remembers.

Once on the island, there are no TVs, phones or clocks, she says, although there is a small shop for last-minute sundries. Guests aren’t allowed to use their cell phones on the property — Wi-Fi is restricted to individual rooms. “It’s such a relaxing experience to be able to completely unplug,” Morton says. “You’re actually connecting with other people, engaging. It’s a freeing experience.”

The attendees had free time for fishing, snorkeling and receiving spa treat-

O’Connor says she would have dispensed with the passed hors d’oeuvres. “(It’s a little awkward since you have to sit, and the schooner is a little rocky,” she notes.) Diamond’s Edge has a private space for up to 55 people as well as its own dock. The attendees enjoyed again, the dates she needed weren’t available. With 30 available suites, the space can quickly fill up.

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“Be cautious of time frames,” O’Connor advises. “September is a little chilly, so July/August/early September is a good time to go. If it’s cold, the schooner might not be super enjoyable. Consider taking the schooner out and the ferry back.” Still, the rooms with views of the sea and the warmth of the reception more

Japan are always pleased with the location; the intimate, quaint and upscale ‘beachy’ feel of the property; and the welcoming staff.” Attendees enjoy the onsite restaurant, Baleen Kitchen, which boasts execu-
tive chef Richard Crispin, late of Jean-
The Diplomat Resort & Spa Hollywood, Curio Collection by Hilton, features a yacht cruise along the Intracoastal Waterway.

The Paddlewheeler Creole Queen also can be chartered privately in New Orleans to cruise the Mississippi River as attendees enjoy a Creole buffet or one of various other options. With its beachfront location and 209,000 sf of flexible function space, The Diplomat Resort & Spa Hollywood, Curio Collection by Hilton offers an ideal gathering place for a meeting. Guests can re-energize their team and inspire creativity by hosting a meeting on one of South Florida’s finest yachts. Four-hour cruising along the Intracoastal Waterway is an ideal way to foster new ideas.

Situated on a mile stretch of white sandy beaches, Diplomat Resort & Spa Hollywood offers indoor and outdoor function space including the 50,000-sf unobstructed Great Hall, four ballrooms and 39 breakout rooms. The resort offers a variety of on-site amenities and activities for groups from 10 to 8,000 and is located just a short drive away from Hollywood’s historic oceanfront Broadwalk, Aventura Mall and the Village at Gulfstream Park.

Noteworthy Beach Meeting Spots

Eeden Roc Miami Beach’s 70,000 sf of meeting space includes 25,000 sf of outside space with ocean views. A number of the rooms also have ocean or Intracoastal Waterway views.

The 309-room Eau Palm Beach of

Credit: The Ocean Reef Club

Buccaneer Island, at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida, is an ideal site for waterfront special events of any size. Kayaking is a popular activity at Ocean Reef Club.

Kim Lefebvre, DMCP Account Executive 360 Destination Group, San Diego, CA

“I think that a cruise is a great networking and celebration opportunity. As long as you do not make the cruise extra long, it gives everyone just enough time to eat, mingle and enjoy the surroundings.”

Flagship Cruises and Events vessel, The Spirit of San Diego, fits the type of yacht Kim Lefebvre’s group enjoyed on a two-hour private cruise in San Diego Bay with narration and lunch.

The same-size catamaran can be hired for its private catamaran charter estate mansion tour of homes on the Palm Beach waterfront. The two-hour tour includes wine, champagne, beer and soda; cheese, crackers and fruit; and the ministrations of a captain and crew. The same-size catamaran can be hired for four hours from Port Lauderdale to whisk groups away to a beach between the ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway, where they’ll enjoy water sports and a barbecue or clambake.

Biscayne Lady Yacht Charters offers planners a way to customize a 380-passenger yacht charter from Miami with the theme and food of their specifications. For example, planners can organize custom décor for a product launch or teambuilding experience.

Chattanooga’s 450-passenger Southern Belle Riverboat can be chartered for attendees to cruise the Tennessee River. The enclosed decks can accommodate about 350 people for a buffet. For planners who prefer to skip the open water, the Pier 2 at the Landing can seat several hundred attendees for a dockside lunch or dinner.

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fers 3,000 sf of oceanfront terrace with a fire pit as part of 30,000 sf of meeting space, including a nearly 10,000 sf ballroom; poolside meeting cabanas; an Ocean Ballroom and the Eau Spa. Key Largo’s Ocean Reef Club sits on 2,500 acres and boasts its own private airport and private marina; two golf courses; tennis; croquet; and 3,000 sf of meeting space, including a ballroom that can hold 700 and a rooftop terrace for 175 with views of the marina.

The Ritz-Carlton, Naples features 42,000 sf of meeting space along with 3,000 sf of oceanfront terrace with a fire pit as part of 50,000 sf of indoor meeting space. Paradise Point in San Diego, California, boasts 30,000 sf of outdoor event space as well as 50,000 sf of indoor meeting space.

Within the “Top Destination in the USA” by Conde Nast Traveler. This beachside setting along the South Carolina low country, minutes from Charleston, is sure to inspire incentive groups. Charleston offers quintessential low country dining experiences including seafood straight from area waterways and foods from neighboring plantations, served up in unique locales such as sailboats along the Charleston Harbor, oceanfront resort venues, neighboring barrier islands, local favorites or piazza-side with Charleston celebrity foodies.

As a top-rated meeting and event destination, Grand Lucayan Beach & Golf Resort on Grand Bahama Island is renowned for its paradise setting, exceptional amenities and excellent venues. With 20 distinct meeting and event areas totaling 90,000 sf of both indoor and outdoor space, they can accommodate any function.

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The “view from the top” of corporate America looks very promising for the continued integration of mobile apps and meetings. One of the major providers in this space, QuickMobile, has seen a surge in adoption over the last few years by top-tier corporations, notes Craig Brennan, CEO.

Compelling Reasons to Get on the Meeting App Bandwagon

One of the major providers in this space, QuickMobile, has seen a surge in adoption over the last few years by top-tier corporations, notes Craig Brennan, CEO.

"If I take about six customers that we have, companies such as KMPG, Oracle and Deloitte, in 2013 we did 105 meetings and events with them, last year about 280, and this year we think it’s going to be over 600," Brennan says, adding that the growth in the use of mobile is taking place in two dimensions: size and type of meeting. QuickMobile’s initial corporate accounts were large, customer-facing events, but now the event size ranges from about 50 to 50,000 attendees, and even smaller gatherings. Types of events extend well beyond client-facing meetings to sales kickoffs, trade shows, employee training, leadership summits, employee onboarding events and more, Brennan observes.

But it isn’t just host companies and planners driving the use of mobile, it’s the attendees themselves, particularly in the case of trade shows. As Jordan Schwartz, CEO of Pathable, notes, “The ubiquity of mobile phones, iPhones or Androids, has made it so there’s an assumption on the attendees’ part that they will have access to the agenda, maps and exhibitor listings so they’ll be able to preschedule meetings. Whereas before I think a meeting planner could ‘wow’ their attendees by offering them those features on the mobile phone, now it’s a given, and when it’s not offered they’re going to complain.”

Vanishing Ink

On the meeting host’s side, mobile has certainly alleviated one source of complaint: the time and money expenditures of printing and distributing meeting materials. According to “Event Planning & Mobile Technology,” a May 2014 survey of 298 event planners (26 percent corporate) by the IMEX Group and QuickMobile, “reducing/eliminating the use of paper” was the second most important reason for having a mobile app, behind “organizer-to-attendee communication and sharing.”

“The biggest breakthrough was when you were able to stop producing hard-copy handouts of presentation slides because you assumed most people could follow along on a mobile device,” recalls Rhonda King, CMP, registration manager with San Jose, California-based Align Technology Inc. King, who says she printed conference guides “the size of phone books” in the days before mobile, has shifted her focus away from “being an expert on print” and needing to know printer scheduling, costs and so on. She now focuses on how to best provide the information through an app, specifically EventMobi.

Not only are printing costs saved, but the information also can be updated as needed. “We find that the accuracy of the data is the biggest benefit for using mobile event apps,” she says. “You can make real-time changes to the presentation slides. And if session rooms change, you can get that information out quickly and accurately.” In addition, King has been able to eliminate the pocket guides that fit behind name badges and reduce the amount of personal information on the badges themselves, making them more legible. “Currently we’re still doing more signage and printed materials than I would like, but I hope that in the future (the app) will be so second nature to all attendees that we’ll be out of the business of printing conference support materials.”

Fort Collins, Colorado-based Schneider Electric, a client of QuickMobile, offers meeting and event mobile app platforms for single or multiple events.

"We used (the app) to capture some real time feedback... and some of that actually ended up feeding the closing session."

Todd Moran
Director of Social Enterprise
Schneider Electric
Fort Collins, CO

QuickMobile offers meeting and event mobile app platforms for single or multiple events.
Know Your Audience

The meeting attendee without a smartphone is an anomaly these days, but that doesn’t mean that all attendees will immediately see the value in using a meeting app, particularly a complex one that is laden with functionality. Depending on how inclined attendees are to toward using mobile technology, event organizers may need to promote the use of the app, and roll out a tool that is user-friendly enough to invite adoption. As usual, knowing one’s audience is key.

The Right Degree of Functionality

Align Technology Inc. began using mobile for its client-facing events about four years ago and currently partners with EventMobi. Despite being in the tech sphere, the company is one of the later adopters of mobile for its events, and that has to do with the nature of its clients. “The company is a tech company in Silicon Valley, but we’re not doing developer conferences,” explains Rhonda King, CMP, registration manager. “Our attendees are not necessarily a high-tech audience, they are dentists.”

The app needed to be a tool that is “really intuitive to a smartphone user but not too advanced for a consumer-type event. Some companies just have so many different features. If your event does not have sponsors or exhibitors, for example, their toolset is too deep and the value just starts to diminish because you don’t need to buy everything.” EventMobi proved to be both an economical choice and to have the right degree of functionality for the audience.

Keeping It Simple

The storeowners attending Chicago, Illinois-based True Value Company’s spring and fall trade shows are, like doctors and dentists, not necessarily “techies.” Thus, widespread adoption of an event app across the 8,000-11,000 attendees is not exactly a given. True Value has partnered with Core-apps to offer them a tool that is “pretty simple as far as our features at this point because we’re really trying to get as many people using the app as possible,” remarks Susan Katz, director of corporate events and travel. Currently offered features include a searchable education program, session scheduling, interactive exhibit floor map where vendors can be book-marked, a vendor database that is searchable by product departments, shuttle bus and special event listings, and attendee profiles with a “friend-finding” function. Still under consideration is the integration of the app with social media such as Instagram, as well as gamification.

Acclimatization

Katz and her team collect data on the number of attendees who have downloaded the app at each show, and track numerous other metrics, such as page views, file downloads, length of stay in certain areas and more. But increasing adoption is the overarching goal. “We’re just looking at keeping levels up at this point and seeing it grow, and hopefully at some point we can stop printing materials,” Katz says. Going into its fourth year of using the app, the company is adding features gradually, to make it easier for attendees to get acclimated with the tool. “You have to know your audience. If it’s a high-tech audience they’re going to soak this up so quickly, but I have people who are working in their stores all day helping their customers,” Katz says. “So they’re not necessarily working with mobile devices.” With the app’s gradual roll out, however, these attendees are becoming more “high tech” each year.

App Coaches

“These are independent hardware stores that are mostly family-owned and operated, so we’re working with multiple generations, and some of them are much savvier with their smartphones than others,” Katz explains. “So our challenge is getting them to understand the value of downloading the app and using it to replace paper.” Toward that end, “we’ve brought in students from the local hospitality program to our event to give them an opportunity to see a large trade show, and they help us as app coaches because it’s second nature to them. They give a quick tutorial on how to use the app, and we ask them to intercept as many people as they can.” The students work varying shifts, with four or five of them on the exhibit floor at a time.

Enhancing Engagement

Another big reason why meeting hosts and planners are behind the use of mobile is its capacity to support engagement with the event. That takes several forms, including networking with other attendees, participating in presentations via audience response, answering poll questions and posting comments about the event, and even playing event-related games through the app (gamification). The first kind of engagement is not just a priority at trade shows and large association meetings; corporate meetings also can benefit from app-based networking.

At a sales meeting, for example, companies often are looking for the sales team “to connect with each other beforehand, start conversations about the industry, ask questions and share knowledge,” Schwartz says. But the virtual conversations should mainly be limited to pre and post event, he maintains. “During the event the app isn’t necessarily the means of communication but rather the tool for encouraging face-to-face communication,” for example, by allowing attendees to quickly search for and review one another’s profiles. “If you are looking to encourage face-to-face conversations, be sure the app’s functionality is fully demonstrated so attendees can see the potential.”

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The Meeting Attendee Without a Smartphone is an Anomaly These Days, but That Doesn’t Mean That All Attendees Will Immediately See the Value in Using a Meeting App, Particularly a Complex One That Is Laden with Functionality. Depending on How Inclined Attendees Are Toward Using Mobile Technology, Event Organizers May Need to Promote the Use of the App, and Roll Out a Tool That Is User-Friendly Enough to Invite Adoption. As Usual, Knowing One’s Audience Is Key.
you have people at the event who are trying to network through the app itself, I think that’s crazy and counterproductive to networking,” Schwartz adds. The app is a “networking and planning tool before the event, a reference tool during, and a (virtual) community tool after.” He observes that the latter is a function that attendees are less accustomed to, compared to agenda and map features. But companies are increasingly interested in integrating apps with online communities to effectively extend the life cycle of the event.

Attendees also become more engaged when they can provide ongoing feedback on the event and its content. Schneider Electric found QuickMobile’s Q&A feature “pretty intriguing,” Moran says. “We used that to capture some real time, not survey specific, unstructured feedback throughout the user conference, and some of that actually ended up feeding the closing session.” At that point, Schneider representatives addressed comments and questions gathered through the app over the last three days. “It was a little scary for some of the execs who had to stand on-stage and (field the questions), but I think it was very powerful in terms of the attendee experience,” Moran says. The experience also becomes more fun with app-enabled gamification. Through QuickMobile, each attendee is given a QR code, and the codes are exchanged through the app when they make a connection; that data is tied-in to a leaderboard based on the number of connections they made at the event. “We also awarded 40 points for every check-in attendees did in the marketplace (using their QR code), which encouraged them to go look at the demo stations and immerse themselves in the technology,” Moran explains. Certain behavior at the event is both encouraged and tracked in these ways, which can lead to on-site adjustments by the organizers. “Based on check-in activity we saw on Day One for the learning lounge we ended up doubling up on staffing for the second day,” he notes. “That is something we would have typically done for the following year, had it not been for real-time feedback based on QR code check-ins.”

Tracking and Analytics

Along with saving print costs and attendee engagement, the third advantage of mobile is the ability to gather analytics of the sort Moran describes. It’s certainly a key feature: The IMEX Group/QuickMobile study identified “usage analytics” as the second most important “event app must-have,” behind “a user friendly way for me to manage app content.” Event hosts and planners can track numerous behaviors quantitatively, including the downloading of materials, viewing of specific content, connections made with others, participation in polls and so forth. “So all of a sudden where there used to be a black hole with no data,” says Brennan, “now we can start to measure the behaviors at these meetings and events and continue to improve on it.”

Brennan sees at least two major frontiers for mobile that will render it an even better tool for event planners. One is the integration of the apps with other enterprise systems, such as those in the areas of sales and marketing, customer service and learning management. “The more you can contextualize the attendee, and the more that you can capture data about the attendee and what’s happening at that meeting, it creates more value for the enterprise and for the attendees themselves,” he says. A second frontier is security: “Today’s event planner definitely has to be aware of IT security on mobility units. All of our tier-one clients require a high degree of security, and it’s a critical component of our platform,” he stresses.

Indeed, event planners must be aware of the numerous features that mobile companies are touting on the market today in order to make an informed purchasing choice. Pairing apps with events is becoming part of the skillset of the modern meeting planner, although it wasn’t 10 years ago when King received her CMP. “There used to be loads of information (in the currancy) about printing meeting materials when I got the designation,” she observes. Times have changed.

“We find that the accuracy of the data is the biggest benefit for using mobile event apps. You can make real-time changes.”

Rhonda King, CMP Registration Manager Align Technology Inc.
San Jose, CA

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Meeting in the Mountains

Now Is a Great Time to Find the Best Options and Values for Wintertime Events

By Christine Loomis

F all and winter can be prime time for companies to meet, but that doesn’t always mean booking a warm-weather destination. In fact, many towns in and near America’s mountains make planners’ short lists with good reason. These destinations not only provide accommodations for meetings, our participants could possibly want.”

Robin Hammons, event coordina-
tor for the GulfPort, Mississippi-based Domino’s Franchisee Forum, says her group always books The Gant, a Destina-
tion Hotel. “Our group has been com-
ing to Aspen for 15-plus years and has always stayed at The Gant,” she says. “It is the most reasonably priced for the ac-
commodations. Our group likes to bring family, and The Gant is one of the only places in Aspen with condo-type accom-
modations as well as meeting facilities.” It’s a bonus, Hammons adds, that “it’s also within walking distance to town and provides shuttle service around town, and to and from the airport.” The Domino’s group, which in March 2015 was comprised of about 95 attend-
ees, always uses The Gant’s conference facili-
ties for meetings, and has held small evening receptions there as well. Hammons calls the staff “accommodating, friendly and professional,” and says the room is always set up on time. “The food,” she adds, “is excellent.” But Aspen staff is what makes this group return time after time. “The largest draw for our group always returning to Aspen is the town,” Hammons says. “Aspen is one of the best towns for food, entertainment and shopping for a ski destination. Our group typically comes to Aspen every other year or at least every two years.”

“We’ve used the Community Ice Rink for a private party and hockey game,” she continues. “We also usually have a couple of nights when attendees are on their own and dine in local restaurants. The food is always good and there are many options to choose from.”

At times the group has received discounts on ski rentals, which helps lower costs for attendees. Hammons has few complaints about meeting in Aspen, though she wishes there were a few more dining and activity options for larger groups. And she points out that for skiers and riders who don’t want to tackle Aspen Mountain, bus transpor-
tation is required to Buttermilk and Snowmass, which better accommodate beginners and intermediates. That said, the town delivers.

“Aspen,” Hammons says, “is usually one of our highest-rated meetings.”

Breckenridge, Colorado

Breckenridge is part of the Vail Resorts portfolio of ski areas and another Colorado town with colorful history. Vail Resorts has five lodging properties in town: The Village at Breckenridge, DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Breckenridge, Mountain Thunder Lodge, One Ski Hill Place and Crystal Peak Lodge. Together the lodges encompass 560 rooms, 40,000 sf of meeting space and can accommo-
date groups of up to 500. The company can act as a single resource for planners, from lodging, event planning and on-
mountain dining to lift tickets, equip-
ment rental and transportation.

Annie Bolduc, sales enablement man-
ager for Atlanta, Georgia-based Premier Global Services Inc. (PGi), which designs conferencing tools to better facilitate collaboration, brought 35 top incentive qualifiers to Breckenridge in December 2013 for PGi’s Sell Your Way to the Peak event. The group chose One Ski Hill Place for its host hotel.

“Of all the resorts in Breckenridge, I truly believe you cannot get a better loca-
tion,” Bolduc says. “First, it’s right at the base of Peak 8, convenient for avid skiers and close to downtown and trans-
portation. Second, the amenities are plentiful and appealing to everyone. In Breckenridge, it’s hard to find a resort that will appeal to people who do not ski, and One Ski Hill achieves that perfectly. Third, there’s the staff. They made my work extremely easy, and the whole pro-
cess was completely stress-free.”

The attendees agreed with Bolduc’s assess-
ment. “For weeks after the event, I received emails from participants saying that the resort was outstanding. From the concierge staff and food to amazing accommoda-
tions, our participants could not stop raving about the experience. People loved the bowling alley, the fact that you could just step out of the hotel and start skiing immediately and how luxurious the accommodations were. In fact, many people came back, booking their personal vacation at One Ski Hill with their families since they had been so impressed and wanted more.”

Bolduc calls two staff members, Lisa Eastlund and Toby Wojcik, “miracle workers,” adding, “I have planned oth-
er events, and the staff at One Ski Hill was, by far, the most helpful I have ever encountered.”

One Ski Hill Place was also the venue for the group’s cocktail party. “The vari-
ey of food we had put together for ev-
everyone satisfied even the picky eaters, and the staff not only worked within our budget, they somehow managed to save us money.”

As for the town, Bolduc says, “Breckenridge was the perfect fit because it appealed to skiers and non-skiers. Our event was a sales incentive so we needed somewhere that would be rewarding for everyone. Since we do a beach trip for our Chairman’s Club, I wanted to plan an event that wouldn’t feel like a Chairman’s Club trip but still be exciting for all par-
ticipants, and Breckenridge met all these requirements.

The resort accommoda-
tions are stunning, luxurious and it is conveniently located near everything the participants could possibly want.”

The group booked a dinner in town at Twist, which was a hit. “Everyone loved the comfort food, especially with how cold it was that week,” Bolduc says. “It was food they knew and loved but with a twist that elevated it. We’ve booked our dinner with Twist again for this year’s trip.”

In summing up the 2013 event, Bolduc has one word: “perfection.” She didn’t get a single complaint in the event’s follow-
up survey. “We’re thinking this will be-
come our annual incentive trip,” she says.

To her fellow planners considering Breckenridge, Bolduc suggests starting the planning process as early as possible. “This is a popular resort, and you want to make sure you have enough room for your event. Be open and upfront with the

Resort at Squaw Creek, a Destination Hotel, is located in the heart of Olympic Valley, California, with direct lift service to Squaw Valley USA.
The Interconnect Gondola, an eight-car, 1,200 accommodations. The conference taintop venue, outdoor pavilion as well throughout the resort includes a mountain and Conference Center provides more than 60,000 sf of exhibit, function and Keystone, Colorado joy high-altitude dining at the Bavarian-style Der Fondue Chessel or the AAA one of Colorado’s best-known mountain resorts. But for some planners, intimacy Beaver Creek is the ideal fit. CCMC Capital Advisors LLC, a New York- and Houston-based global private equity firm specializing in buyout and growth equity investments in North America and Europe, brings a group to Park Hyatt Beaver Creek Resort & Spa each February. Tracie Walton, assistant director of sales for the Hyatt, plans the annual events for 30-plus attendees. “The Park Hyatt is a beautiful property with excellent staff,” she says. “The location is great, and the service is top-notch.” She has high praise for the resort staff, particularly Andy Hoen, senior sales manager, and Christie Gregg, event planning manager. “Andy does an excellent job with our group each year. He works hard on providing the best rate possible and goes over the contract thoroughly with me. He’s always available if I have questions, even after business hours. Andy knows our group needs and is always prepared when we speak. Christie goes above and beyond each year. I’ve worked with her for many years, and I always feel confident working with her. After the event, she works with me on billing and explanation of services. She is cheerful and willing to help at any time.” Woodley says the attendees engage in a multitude of winter activities, including skiing. They also go out to eat and have enjoyed Mirabelle as well as out being rushed to catch a shuttle back to the hotel.” Though the city was chosen for its proximity to a Medtronic facility, Woodley calls The Broadmoor “a bonus we didn’t expect! This was our first visit there but probably won’t be our last.” Her group didn’t have time to go into the city, but she suggests anyone planning a meeting in Colorado Springs build time into the schedule to do that. Other thought: “Plan your meeting in early December to enjoy the most beautiful holiday decorations ever!”

Lake Tahoe, Nevada
Lake Tahoe is actually two distinct areas: Lively South Lake Tahoe, combining the assets of an expansive ski resort, gaming, nightlife, and the buzier south shore of the lake, and more serene North Tahoe, imbued with the characteristcs of an upscale mountain resort overlooking one of the most beautiful lakes in America.

South Lake Tahoe lodging properties with meeting space include the green-focused, moderately priced Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel with 400 suites, complimentary breakfast and 10,000 sf of meeting space. For groups wanting to combine a meeting with onsite gaming, there’s Harrah’s Lake Tahoe, the 18-story, 352-room hotel with 25,000 sf of meeting space and multiple excel- lent restaurants and a spa. It’s connect- ed to sister property, Harvey’s Resort & Casino, with 740 rooms and more than 22,000 sf of meeting space. All three of these hotels provide easy access to the Heavenly ski area.

With properties such as the AAA Five Diamond Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe, North Tahoe is well suited for incentive trips. The hotel has 170 guest rooms with fireplaces, a 17,000 sf spa and meeting space for up to 400 guests, including two ballrooms with floor-to-ceiling windows. The Ritz-Carlton sits at mid-mountain. Northstar Village, base area for Northstar California ski resort, offers conference space for up to 200 attend- ees among its 200 lodging units and 35 shops and restaurants. The year-round venues feature hard-wired AV and com- plimentary Internet access.

A short distance from Northstar, set at the base of Squaw Valley ski area, is the Resort at Squaw Creek, a Destination Hotel. The AAA Four Diamond resort offers 405 rooms and 33,000 sf of indoor meeting space, plus a long list of team- building activities that include dog-sledding in winter.

Park City, Utah
Located just 35 minutes from Salt Lake City International Airport, Park City makes it easy to stage a meeting at a top ski resort. Thirty area hotels have meeting facilities for a total of 125,000 sf. The variety and scope of activities, from skiing and riding to bobsledding, winter fly-fishing and hot-air balloon rides, make Park City an ideal incentive or meeting destination. Good choices for groups include the Park City Marriott, headquarters for the annual Sundance Film Festival, with 191 guest rooms and 10,000 sf of meeting space. The property unveiled a multimillion-dollar renova- tion in 2014. Montage Deer Valley fea- tures 154 guest rooms, 66 suites and residences, and more than 55,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting and event space. Waldorf Astoria Park City is the brand’s first luxury mountain lodge. It includes 201 accommodations, two boardrooms and a presidential suite ac- commodating up to 70 guests. Vail Resorts Inc. received unanimous approval from the Park City Planning Commission, and the project will be a major enhancement to the city’s infrastructure of both resorts.

Components of the $50-million capital plan for the 2015–16 ski season. The plan will establish a connection between Park City Mountain Resort and Canyons Resort, creating the largest single ski area in the country with more than 7,300 acres of skiable terrain. Also, critical upgrades will be made to the in- frastructure of both resorts. The property unveils an impactful cap- ital plan include:
• The Interconnect Gondola, an eight-passenger, high-speed, two-way

Vickey Woodley, Senior Manager, Meeting Services Medtronic Surgical Technologies, Jacksonville, FL

“Unlike most suppliers, Medtronic is committed to customer feedback, which is key to our team.”

Aspen, Colorado, consistently rated as one of the world’s top ski areas, is a year- round destination.

Vail and Beaver Creek, Colorado
Expansive Vail and compact Beaver Creek are popular with groups for dif- ferent reasons. Few mountain towns boast the sheer number of restaurants, accommodations and activities as Vail, one of Colorado’s best-known mountain resorts. But for some planners, intimacy Beaver Creek is the ideal fit. CCMP Capital Advisors LLC, a New York- and Houston-based global private equity firm specializing in buyout and growth equity investments in North America and Europe, brings a group to Park Hyatt Beaver Creek Resort & Spa each February. Tracie Walton, assistant director of sales for the Hyatt, plans the annual events for 30-plus attendees. “The Park Hyatt is a beautiful property with excellent staff,” she says. “The location is great, and the service is top-notch.”

She has high praise for the resort staff, particularly Andy Hoen, senior sales manager, and Christie Gregg, event planning manager. “Andy does an excellent job with our group each year. He works hard on providing the best rate possible and goes over the contract thoroughly with me. He’s always available if I have questions, even after business hours. Andy knows our group needs and is always prepared when we speak. Christie goes above and beyond each year. I’ve worked with her for many years, and I always feel confident working with her. After the event, she works with me on billing and explanation of services. She is cheerful and willing to help at any time.”

Woodley says the attendees engage in a multitude of winter activities, including skiing. They also go out to eat and have enjoyed Mirabelle as well as Beaver Creek’s famed luxury on-moun- tain restaurant, Beano’s Cabin. For 2015, the group has reserved the pri- vate Allie’s Cabin, also on the mountain, for a function.

Colorado Springs, Colorado
Not all of Colorado’s winter desti- nations are in the mountains. With a relatively mild winter climate, more than 500,000 sf of meeting space and 14,000 guest rooms, Colorado Springs is an excellent choice for a winter meeting. Hotel choices include the Antlers Hilton Colorado Springs and Cheyenne Mountain Resort & Club, and there are settings for offsite functions at the Air Force Academy, Cheyenne Moun- tain Zoo and Cottonwood Center for the Arts. It’s also worth noting that the ma- jority of the area’s attractions are open in winter, and the city is less than two hours from superb skiing.

Vickey Woodley, senior manager of meeting services for Jacksonville, Florida-based Medtronic Surgical Technologies, brought 140 attendees to a meeting in Colorado Springs in winter 2014, the group has reserved the pri- vate Allie’s Cabin, also on the mountain, for a function.

Colorado’s Vail Village is great for shopping, strolling, dining, barhopping and more.
gondola from the base of the existing Silverlode Lift at Park City to the Flatiron Lift at Canyons. This will mark the first gondola at Park City Mountain Resort since “The Gondola” was dismantled in 1997.

- Upgrade of King Con and Motherlode Lifts at Park City. The King Con Lift will be upgraded from a four-person, high-speed detachable chairlift, and the Motherlode Lift will be upgraded from a fixed-grip triple to a four-person, high-speed detachable chairlift. Both upgrades will reduce crowding, lift lines and improve the guest experience.

- The plan calls for building a comprehensive personal well-being programs and nutritious menu options into events for attendees.

- Flatiron Lift at Canyons. This will become increasingly central ski terrain given its proximity to the Interconnect Gondola, with 500 downhill and Nordic ski areas, some of which is much better than having our company planners explain it to guests.”

- Weekend was held at Stowe Mountain Lodge with 150 in attendance. It was a superb example. PC Connection Inc., based in Merrimack, New Hampshire, plans an incentive winter weekend every year. In February 2014, its Winter Wonderland Weekend was held at Stowe Mountain Lodge with 150 in attendance. It was the company’s first year at the lodge, and Melissa O’Connor, event manager, sales support and marketing division, booked a return in 2015.

- “Stowe Mountain Lodge provides the opportunity for our incentive winners to get away from the fast pace of the city and enter into an upscale rustic oasis. Some of our guests utilized the downhill and Nordic ski areas, some went ice climbing or snowmobiling and others were content staying on the resort, whether in the spa or just reading a book in front of the fireplace.”

- Participants also took advantage of local tours, including to nearby Ben & Jerry’s and Cabot Creamery. Functions were held in resort venues. "We used the junior ballroom for our on-flow welcome reception on Friday night and the larger ballroom (across the hall) for our dinner and awards banquet on Saturday night. The space is perfect for our group size. Dinner service on Saturday was a little slow," O’Connor says, “but the food itself was great. Unique seasonal dinner options were very much appreciated by our guests. The staff was in tune to our every need, from the servers to the banquet manager, valet to the front desk.”

- Tracie Smith, who assisted O’Connor, notes, “It was nice that we were able to have something other than the standard tables and chairs for furnishings the of our welcome reception. The couches and seating areas made the space feel cozy and comfortable.”

- Both O’Connor and Smith commend resort staff in all areas and from start to finish.

- "Everything leading up to the event was great, communication and correspondence back and forth was a pleasure," O’Connor says. "The actual event was truly a relaxing weekend getaway for all of our guests — including the planner." Before O’Connor’s next trip, they met with the sales manager and brainstormed how to make every piece of the weekend flawless. We look forward to visiting SML again and again.

- With the first event already in the books, O’Connor did learn a few things. “The vouchers for lift tickets, rentals, gondola and Nordic trails were slightly confusing during our check-in process. Now we know SML will lend us a staff member to take care of this piece, which is much better than having our company planners explain it to guests.”

- O’Connor calls the event a “remarkable weekend,” thanks to staff willing to do whatever it took to accommodate her group’s needs and to the lodge itself. "Although the resort is pricey, the quality and lasting impression/experience is 100 percent there.”

- It just goes to show that planners booking wintersite meetings shouldn’t always look south. The snowy mountains of the north have much to offer. CR&IT
A

though the meeting industry has returned to robust health and vitality, one lingering aftereffect of the Great Recession has been unprecedented and ongoing management scrutiny of budgets, while at the same time companies also want to do more with what they have.

Huckaby says. That means many A-list suppliers will be reviewing very carefully. And many companies, Turner Gravitt Jr., director, corporate events, member relations and government affairs at Richmond, Virginia-based agricultural supplier South States Cooperative, faces tight budgets on his radar. He says, “It wasn’t a destination, it never even came into consideration. But once I discovered Oklahoma City and realized the number of flights coming in and the accessibility and convenience it offers with its downtown area, I saw that it is a very attractive destination.”

And like Dallas/Fort Worth, Oklahoma City is equidistant between the East and West coasts, which makes it a favorable choice in terms of logistics. It offers similar hotel product and dining and entertainment options, but at a significantly reduced cost, Huckaby says. Oklahoma City represents substantial savings over doing the same meeting in Chicago or Dallas, Huckaby says. “And one reason for that is lower airfares,” she says. “And because the airport is very close to downtown, it’s a very convenient destination and you save money on ground transportation. And you get good value in food and beverage and meeting space. You get good value on everything.”

But there’s also an important related benefit that Huckaby and her clients appreciate. “Oklahoma City really offers that kind of down-home hospitality that you don’t find in many places anymore,” she says. “And there are just great people in Oklahoma City. That’s something that is becoming more and more important in terms of the kind of support and service you’re going to get. Good people enable a successful event. And Oklahoma City has great people. You get smiles and Southern hospitality. And your attendees get well taken care of.”

Over and above that, Huckaby was surprised to discover how much there is to do in Oklahoma City. Popular with attendees is Bricktown (pictured), the former warehouse district on the Bricktown Canal, offering entertainment, shopping and dining. “There’s a lot of nightlife downtown,” she says. “There are a lot of fine-dining restaurants and a wide range of inexpensive restaurants.” And she notes that the Boathouse District offers a range of outdoor adventures such as kayaking, tubing and biking. “I don’t think most planners realize how much there is to do in Oklahoma City. And a lot of things are within walking distance of the hotels. The city also has great infrastructure.”

In 2016, Oklahoma City’s Boathouse District, home to the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic training site for Canoe/Kayak, will host the U.S. Olympic trials. In his quest for value, Jeremy Ball, director of philanthropy and corporate events at retail store operator Big Lots, uses the company’s hometown of Columbus, Ohio, for all of the half-dozen meetings and events he plans each year. The reason for his fierce loyalty is simple, Ball says: Big Lots has never found a destination that provides better value than Columbus.

“We choose to do our meetings here because Columbus is a top value destination,” he says. “We’ve considered other places, but we ended up making a decision that we want to host all our important meetings locally because we get great value here.”

Value is a principle that is deeply embedded in the company’s identity, Ball says. “It’s our anthem,” he says. “We’re all about value in everything we do, whether it’s what our customers look for in a store or it’s something we do as an organization. And that also applies to where we do our meetings and events. And when it comes to value, Columbus has a compelling story to tell. It provides excellent value, but
it also provides an excellent experience. And that is also important to us and our attendees.”

Another key factor in Ball’s loy-alty to the destination is Experience Columbus, the local CVB. “I can’t speak highly enough of them,” he says. “And the way we work with them has become even more important as our company has grown. And growing as rapidly as we have in the last few years has challenged us when it comes to fitting more people into our meetings and events and providing an experience that will get them excited. And that has meant moving our events into bigger venues, and we have gotten a lot of help from Experience Columbus.”

Their biggest meetings now, for between 700 and 1,000 attendees from all over the U.S., are held at the Greater Columbus Convention Center (GCCC). Ball also finds the perfect hotel product in Columbus. “We have working relationships with both the Hilton Columbus Downtown and the Hyatt Regency Columbus,” he says. “Those are our two most important venues and the ones we have built real relationships with. In terms of which one makes more sense at any given time, it just depends on the nature of the event.”

In addition to excellent hotels, Columbus also offers a thriving local food scene. “The number of independent entrepreneurs who are opening restaurants is incredible,” he says. “So now we have a lot of great restaurants downtown, but also in some of our other neighborhoods. Personally I am a fan of our local mom-and-pop restaurants, and we have a lot of those that are wonderful. We also have some great local coffee houses and bakeries that are fun for meeting attendees. And now the local craft brewery scene is really taking off. From a value standpoint, we would hate to lose a lot of places where you can have a great experience, but from a cost point of view, we can also get a lot of bang for our buck.”

Beyond all those reasons to love Big Lots’ hometown, Ball says, “Columbus is just a cool city. And there are a lot of cool things going on here.”

New & Noteworthy

The renovations at The Westin Columbus are rolling out in carefully orchestrated phases. The lobby and public space is terrific. The more than 12,000 sf of meeting space has been upgraded, and connectivity has been greatly enhanced with high-speed Internet and convenient wireless capability throughout the public space. The boardroom’s new expansive conference table and 50-inch monitor make it an ideal location for smaller functions.

The GCCC is set to undergo a $125 million renovation and expansion project from September 2015 through July 2017. The space will expand from 1.7 to 1.8 million sf of gain LEED certifica-tion. Of the 100,000 sf of expansion, will include 10,000 sf of two-level meeting space and 37,000 sf of exhibit space, and the meeting room inventory increases from 65 to 75 rooms.

The convention center features 280,000 sf of exhibit space, more than 90,000 sf of flexible meeting space, a 40,000 sf ballroom and a 35,000 sf ballroom.

For his 2,000-attendee meeting, Gravitt says, Charlotte Convention Center is perfectly sized and configured. “It has just always been a great place to use as our main breakout rooms that we need,” he says. Southern States also enjoys good food and beverage value in Charlotte. For the sake of convenience, Ball says, “We have a really good food and beverage control, Gravitt stages breakfast, lunch and dinner at the convention center each day.” “We get excellent food and excellent service,” he says. “And we also get very good value. That’s one of the reasons we keep coming back year after year.”

For the last two years, his headquar ters hotel has been The Westin Charlotte, and it will serve in that role again this fall. “It’s very convenient for us because it’s right across the street from the convention center,” Gravitt says.

With downtown and close proximity to the support services he gets from the local CVB, Visit Charlotte. “They know the area, and they kind of serve as our ‘mediator’ with all our vendors,” he says. “So we work as much as we can through them. We ask them a lot of questions, and then they come up with current information that we know we can rely on. We don’t have as much of a facilitation role here, but the information we’re being given is actually true.”

And Visit Charlotte helped facilitate his superb relationships with the convention center and hotels, Gravitt says. And part of that facilitation has been to ensure that Southern states gets real value from every dollar it spends in town.

“Not only do we get reasonable prices, but the food is great. And the staff we work with at the convention center is great.”

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Another thriving and well-known metropolitan area that also happens to deliver exceptional value to meeting planners is Minneapolis.

Marlys Knutson, external relations manager at Minneapolis-based recreational equipment manufacturer Polaris Industries Inc., uses Minneapolis as its top value destination, “The size and scope of the convention center is probably the biggest surprise to planners who have never been to Minneapolis before. They offset a large percentage of the cost of the facility through hotel room rebates.”

The Minneapolis Convention Center is awesome, and it’s the perfect size for us,” Knutson says. “We’re one of a very few groups that use almost the entire facility. We also have a lot of hotel rooms in downtown Minneapolis that are great. We use 16 hotels for our meeting, and almost everyone can walk to the convention center, so our busing costs were minimal.”

Hotel room costs are one of the primary factors that make Minneapolis a top value destination, “Knutson says. “Although the hotel costs are a bit less expensive than they are in the other destinations that we use,” she says. “The F&B catering we get in Minneapolis is also awesome. Not only do we get reasonable prices, but the food is great. And the staff we work with at the convention center is great.”

Airlift and cost-effective airfares are another budgetary advantage that Minneapolis offers, Knutson says, because the city is a hub for Delta Airlines. Planners who are unfamiliar with Minneapolis will find a number of pleasant surprises there, Knutson says. “I would say the size and scope of the convention center facility is probably the biggest surprise to planners who have never been to Minneapolis before,” she says. “And along with that is the way they offset a large percentage of the cost of the facility through hotel room rebates and things like that. The formula they use really works well.”

All of the 16 hotels Polaris used last year provided a nice rebate. “And
those rebates offset a large percent-
age of our cost for the convention cen-
ter,” Knutson says.
And when it comes to such net cost
savings on a convention center, only
two destinations she knows of offer that
perk, Knutson says. The other is Phoenix.
**New & Noteworthy**
The Minneapolis-Saint Paul met-
ropolitan area saw 30.9 million total
visitors in 2014 — an all-time re-
tation for value is New Orleans.

**New Orleans, Louisiana**

Perhaps the best news of all for plan-
ers is that it’s not just less well known
or second-tier destinations that offer ex-
ceptional value in today’s market.

One A-list, perennially popular desti-
nation that has built a formidable repu-
tation for value is New Orleans.

“I love New Orleans because it not
only delivers real value, but it’s also a
destination that will attract attendees
and make then want to come to the
meeting,” Crouse says. “It’s just a great
destination, because everybody has
heard of New Orleans and there are lots
of things to do there.”

Crouse has used New Orleans re-
peatedly for more than 25 years. And
she gets excellent hotel rates there,
she says, compared to similar major
city destinations.

She and her clients also love the
city’s world-famous culture, dining
scene and unique venues, such as the
World War II Museum.

Most of all, she says, she loves the
New Orleans Convention & Visitors
Bureau. “They just go above and be-
yond to make sure you have everything
you need and that your meeting is suc-
cessful,” Crouse says. “And a big part
of that success is getting value for the
money you spend.”

**New & Noteworthy**
The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial
Convention Center is embarking on an
ambitious new venture that will revital-
ize the City’s riverfront. The Convention
Center District Development Project,
situated on 47 acres upriver from the
center, calls for construction of a new
headquarters hotel, a linear park (pi-
ced) along Convention Center Bou-
levard, outdoor entertainment, arts
and cultural venues and new retail and
housing options.

Readers of Condé Nast Traveler voted
New Orleans the No. 1 “U.S. City for
Business Travelers” in the February is-
 sue of the magazine based on friend-
liness, value, walkability and its
1,400 restaurants.

In January 2015, The New York Times
named New Orleans one of its “52 Places
to Go in 2015,” which proposes untrav-
eled destinations as well as familiar cit-
ies offering travelers new reasons to
visit this year.

Antoine’s Restaurant is celebrating
175 years of French Creole culinary tra-
ditions in 2015. In commemoration of
this prestigious anniversary, the old-
est continuously operating restaurant
in America and birthplace of Oysters
Rockefeller will host special events, pre-
sent new menus and bring its celebra-
tions beyond the French Quarter.

Emeril’s New Orleans, the origi-
nal flagship of Chef Emeril Lagasse,
is celebrating 25 years in the Cres-
cent City in 2015.

Louis Armstrong International Air-
port has surpassed pre-Katrina passen-
ger numbers. With 14 airlines providing
service to 46 nonstop destinations, the
airport is serving the most nonstop des-
tinations in its history. Plans were an-
nounced to build a new, state-of-the-art
airport terminal on the north side of the
current airport property.

The Aloft New Orleans Downtown,
Hilton Lodging’s newest property, opened
in New Orleans’ Central Business Dis-
trict in March 2015. The Aloft offers 188
guest rooms, 2,500 sf of meeting space,
a bar and more. The hotel accompanies
192 apartments in the same building
dubbed the Strand Apartments.

The Wyndham New Orleans-French
Quarter has completed its multimillion-
dollar renovation, which included 374
guest rooms as well as the building’s exter-
ior and improvements to the park-

ing garage.

**Many clients are concerned
about their budgets these
days. And a lot of them want
the best possible quality in
hotel rooms at the lowest
possible price. So we always
look for destinations that we
think deliver real value.”**

Lisa Crouse, Founder
Fagan & Crouse, Marietta, GA

**from the RFP to the thank you letter, we value your time. Quick responses and great
follow-up is our MO here at the South Point. One owner, one hotel makes it easy
for you and us. Another value is we have very little turnover in sales… easy for you,
repeat business for us. The South Point is a convention hotel that will offer your

group enough amenities without the high prices and the crowds up the street.**

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- 4,600 Seat Arena
- Spa Costa Del Sur & Fitness Center
- 11 Restaurants
- 7 Bars/Lounges
- 64-Lane Bowling Center
- Movie Theater with 16 Screens
- Lagoon Style Pool

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Edd Karlan was appointed director of sales and marketing for Hilton West Palm Beach, Florida, expected to open in spring 2016. He most recently led the sales team at the Hilton Atlanta.

The Lodge and Spa at Callaway Gardens in Pine Mountain, Georgia, has named Gail Drouillard as director of sales and marketing. She most recently served as general manager at Destination Club Management in Seacrest Beach, Florida.

Kristin Hankins was appointed director of sales for Sixty Hotels in New York.

Lansdowne Resort, a Destination Hotel, located in Leesburg, Virginia, has appointed Skip James as director of sales and marketing. He was director of sales and marketing at Turnberry Isle Miami.

Sarah Singer Gagnon was appointed director of group sales for the New Orleans Marriott. She was director of sales and marketing for Wyndham New Orleans French Quarter.
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