By John Buchanan

It’s no accident that Orlando — the No. 1 family vacation destination in the world — also rules the roost as the top U.S. meeting destination, again named to that lofty position for 2015 by Cvent. The city broke an all-time record with 66 million visitors in 2015, the most of any other U.S. destination.

Orlando offers formidable airlift, with one of the most passenger-friendly major airports in the country, and a long and ever-expanding list of exceptional meeting hotels ranging from high-end luxury to high-value economy.

But the factor that truly sets Orlando apart in the minds of many meeting planners and attendees is its extraordinary range of things to do. And that range stretches from a world-class dining scene, to nightlife and entertainment, to unique offsite venues and the spectacular theme parks that make Orlando the singular place that it is.

“The great thing about Orlando is that the list of things to do during a meeting is always being updated,” says Stephanie Green, director of product development at destination management company Hello! Florida. “And that’s important since we have groups that repeat Orlando as their destination year after year. But we’re still able to find new and exciting things for them to do, because there is always something new and exciting to do in Orlando, whether that’s at a theme park or an airboat tour or some other kind of activity that gets them outdoors in the sunshine.”

Adds Fred Shea, senior vice president, sales and services, for Visit Orlando: “Everything you hear now about what’s going on with meetings is that it’s really all about the larger experience attendees can have in the destination. Everything you read now says attendees are looking for an experience they will remember, a meeting they can look back on in the future and say was a great event. So the message we want to get out is that when you come to Orlando, and you use venues such as CityWalk or Disney Springs or the new I-Drive 360 or the Harry Potter venue at Universal or the IllumiNations fireworks show at Epcot at Disney World, your attendees are going to have experiences that they cannot get anywhere else. And they’re going to remember those experiences for a very long time and tie them back to your meeting.”

The Orlando Eye observation wheel is central to the I-Drive 360 dining and entertainment complex.

Credit: Visit Orlando

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f all the ways in which Orlando has evolved as a des-
tination over the last few years, none has been more
significant than the improvement of its dining scene.

The most important thing to understand about Orlando as
a meeting destination is that the city’s dining scene has grown
dramatically over the last few years,” says Visit Orlando’s Fred
Shea. “And that’s especially true of dining opportunities for
meeting groups.”

As current examples of an ongoing evolution
that brings ever-increasing
quality and sophis-
tication to Orlando’s
restaurant scene, Shea
cites Pointe Orlando, a
dining, shopping and
entertainment district
across the street from
the Orange County Con-
vention Center, and the
new I-Drive 360 com-
plexes located a short dis-
tance up the street.

At the same time,
Shea says, Orlando’s
culinary innovation also is centered on the well-established
“Restaurant Row,” located along Sand Lake Road, and the
new and expanded Disney Springs complex that is now being
completed on the massive site of the old Downtown Disney in
Lake Buena Vista.

“The opening this year of the ful-
ly completed Disney Springs is go-
ing to be a huge factor in the expan-
sion of our local dining scene,” Shea
says. “But at the same time, we’re
seeing new restaurants at City-
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course, ‘Restaurant Row’ is still a
thriving dining area, especially for
meetings and events.”

A newly invigorated and much
improved inventory of local res-
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growth of Orlando as one of the
largest and most prominent meet-
ing destinations in the U.S., notes
Jennifer Targhetta, an account ex-
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company 360 Destination Group.

“One of the misconceptions
about Orlando has been that we
only have chain restaurants,” Targhetta says. “And that is defi-
nitely not the case. Over the last few years, the dining scene
in Orlando has really developed and evolved. So today, I’d say
we’re one of the better dining destinations in the entire coun-
try. And we have fine dining restaurants located all over the
city at this point.”

Orlando also can boast a list of restaurants operated by
James Beard Award winners and nominees, as well as celebrity
tchers from Todd English to Emeril Lagasse to Iron Chef Ma-
habaru Morimoto, who debuted a new and already acclaimed
Morimoto Asia at Disney Springs last year.

“We’ve also seen the number of new restaurants being
opened increased even further over the last couple of years,”
Targhetta says. “And that is very important to our continuing
growth as a meeting destination, because of course planners
and attendees want a good selection of really great restaurants
when they come to town. And Orlando has that now.”

Although Targhetta has an area-wide list of restaurants she
favors for clients, she is particularly fond of Restaurant Row, located along Sand
Lake Road. She fre-
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planners to create
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tically convenient.

“We use Restaurant Row so of-
ten because it’s very convenient for
groups,” Targhetta says. “You have so many good restaurants right
there. You can find any kind of food
you want. And there are always new
places opening.”

Among her favorite establish-
ments is Vines, a locally owned
restaurant that serves steaks
and seafood, as well as small tapas-style
plates. The restaurant also works
Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto
opened his eponymous restaurant in Disney Springs last year.

The annual Food & Wine Classic at Walt Disney World Swan and
Dolphin features culinary artistry and wines from around the world.

The Boathouse in Disney Springs offers waterfront
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Orlando

A Dining Mecca

with planners to create customized, one-of-a-kind menus. "It’s a relatively new place that’s only been open a few years," Targhetta says. "But it has become very popular with meeting groups because they do a really great job.”

Another dining venue she likes is Eddie V’s, a chop house. "It has a great location," Targhetta says, "because the back side of the restaurant overlooks Sand Lake. So it offers a really nice environment, with great views.”

Another go-to Restaurant Row option for Targhetta is Roy’s. “We do a lot of groups there, because it’s a very unique place that serves South Pacific-style seafood that is very influenced by Hawaiian cuisine,” Targhetta says. "They also have a very good sushi bar.”

Targhetta also favors Pointe Orlando because of its location and roster of dining options under one roof. “We use Cuba Libre a lot,” she says. “One obvious reason it’s so popular is that Cuban cuisine and Cuban culture are such a part of Florida. Another great thing about Cuba Libre is that they provide great service for groups. And they’re always helpful in trying to help planners create the best event they possibly can.”

Within the Pointe, Targhetta also likes the new Lafayette’s, which serves New Orleans-style Cajun and Creole cuisine in a Big Easy-themed, fun environment. It also features live music. "It has great décor that really plays up the New Orleans theme," Targhetta says. "It also offers good value and good service, both of which are very important to planners.”

In Disney Springs, in addition to the new Morimoto Asia, Targhetta recommends — and uses — the House of Blues and The Boathouse, a spectacular waterfront venue that features amphibious cars and classic Italian wooden boats that can accommodate small groups for scenic boat rides within the sprawling Disney Springs complex.

Orlando also is home to a pair of world-class new steak-houses. Del Frisco’s is located in the convention center district, across the street from Pointe Orlando. The second is the Orlando outpost of critically acclaimed STK, which opened last month in Disney Springs, and features rooftop and private dining.

Another Pointe eatery that Targhetta likes is Tommy Bahama’s. He also considers it one of the most important additions to the city's list of restaurants well suited to meeting groups. Another Pointe eatery that Targhetta likes is Tommy Bahamas. "It is a chain restaurant, but it’s very popular with groups because it’s fun," she says. "And again, it just offers something different. It also offers good value and good service, both of which are very important to planners.”

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The House of Blues bar and restaurant, serving traditional Southern cooking, also features a live music club.

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Just as Orlando’s dining scene has evolved to become more sophisticated, so has its entertainment and nightlife scene. “For example, Blue Martini has been a popular entertainment venue for years,” says Jennifer Targhetta of 360 Destination Group. “But now it has moved over to the Pointe and is even more fantastic. It’s just a great venue for groups. And Cuba Libre has done a great job of making the transition each night from a restaurant to a nightlife venue. And it has that great Latin energy.”

New on the Orlando nightlife scene is a local outpost of Mango’s, the world-famous Latin club that features Las Vegas-style live entertainment backed up with a tasty menu and formidable array of creative and colorful cocktails, including an amazing array of Cuban mojitos. “And Mango’s has an amazing energy,” Targhetta says. The venue can host groups of up to 2,000 attendees.

Other live entertainment venues recommended by Shea include the new Cowgirls Rock bar in the I-Drive 360 complex, as well as more established local favorites Howl at the Moon and Tin Roof, both of which feature live music in a fun, energetic environment. Tin Roof also is among Targhetta’s favorite entertainment venues.

Among Visit Orlando S.V.P. Fred Shea’s favorite places for live music is Urbain 40 American Brasserie & Lounge, a stylish dining and entertainment venue on Restaurant Row. “They feature live music like jazz and American standards, so it’s a wonderful venue for meeting groups that want something different. It’s a throwback to the 1940s.” Another restaurant that morphs into an after-dinner live entertainment venue and is recommended by Shea is Rocco’s Tacos & Tequila Bar, which serves 225 different tequilas. “It’s a lot of fun, and because of that it’s become a sort of nightclub, in addition to serving great Mexican food,” Shea says.

And for planners and attendees looking for something a little more grandiose, there are the long-running La Nouba by Cirque du Soleil at Disney Springs and Blue Man Group at Universal CityWalk.

Coming in 2017 to International Drive is a more casual/fun entertainment option: Topgolf, a state-of-the-art golf range facility. The three-level location will be 65,000 sf and offer 102 climate-controlled hitting bays for up to six players each. The venue also will offer teambuilding options and up to 3,000 sf of private event space. For those who want to experience the outdoor version, Orlando offers more than 175 golf courses to choose from.

Another fun venue, Shea says, is the bowling-dining-entertainment complex Splitsville, located in Disney Springs, which serves 225 different tequilas. “Bowling has become popular again, especially for groups,” Shea says. “And Splitsville is just something that is very unique and a lot of fun.”

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Orlando also offers some extraordinary offsite venues, with most of them — such as CityWalk at Universal or Epcot at Walt Disney World — located within the city’s fabled theme parks.

And then, of course, there are the three major theme parks themselves — Disney World, Universal and SeaWorld — which take the term “offsite venue” into an entirely new dimension.

CityWalk at Universal, which has recently completed an expansion that included the addition of a number of new dining and entertainment options, is “a fantastic location for doing a block party for large groups,” 360 Destination Group’s Jennifer Targhetta says. “And you can do a buyout that offers a lot of individual options for dining and entertainment. For smaller groups, you can also do individual buyouts of venues like Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville or Hard Rock Cafe and Hard Rock Live.”

Hard Rock Live at Universal Orlando ranks as one of Targhetta’s favorite venues. “We’ve done all sorts of things at Hard Rock Live,” she says. “We’ve done awards dinners. We’ve done receptions that include a live entertainment show. We have a small group coming up in the fall that is going to use the (John) Lennon Room for a special meet-and-greet. It’s just a really cool venue that offers a number of options in terms of how you use it.”

Onsite catering is provided by the adjacent Hard Rock Cafe, which is also available for buyouts.

Another offsite venue unique to Orlando is Fantasy of Flight, a private facility, open only to groups, that features museum-quality exhibits about the history of aviation. “We’ve used it for receptions,” Targhetta says. “We’ve used it for dinners. We’ve used it for corporate functions. It’s just a very unique venue that is educational, but also a lot of fun.”

When it comes to fun, few attractions in Orlando can match the new Orlando Eye, a giant and stylishly modern “Ferris wheel” that features enclosed compartments. It delivers dramatic, panoramic views of the Orlando area, especially at night. “It’s a great venue for groups, because you can do events outdoors or indoors right beside it,” Shea says. “You can also bring in live entertainment. And it’s part of the I-Drive 360 complex that also includes new venues such as Madame Tussaud’s wax museum, so for large groups, the Orlando Eye can serve as anchor attraction for a multi-faceted evening.”

Stephanie Green, director of product development at destination management company Hello! Florida, points out that another activity popular with groups is airboat excursions for a lot of people, seeing the alligators and the many varieties of birds and other wildlife you see, it’s just another aspect of the area that is special. It’s exciting. And memorable.”
The Theme Park Capital

O

f course, no matter how many activities there might be to choose from in Orlando, none can rival the major theme parks for attention and enthusiasm. “Orlando is the theme park capital of the world,” says Visit Orlando’s Fred Shea. “The theme parks are the number one reason why we are the No. 1 family vacation destination in the world. And they’ve played a major role in the growth of our meeting industry. For so many groups, the existence of the theme parks and the unique appeal and opportunities they offer are among the main reasons they select Orlando as their destination.”

For many meeting planners, the first time they come to Orlando for a site inspection, they are surprised by what the theme parks offer for adult groups, Shea says. “They’re actually quite surprised by what the theme parks can do for a meeting and the production capabilities they have. They’re also surprised by the flexibility the parks have and the fact that they can accommodate any kind of group, from a relatively small group to a major citywide convention. And in terms of what they can do, they can do virtually anything a planner wants done. And all of it can be tied to your corporate identity or meeting theme.”

But the real benefit of the theme parks, he says, is the extraordinary production capabilities that are included in the price. “And in addition to having all that included in the price of the event, that also means the planner does not have to worry about that stuff. It’s taken care of by professional people that do nothing but stage spectacular events for groups. And what those facilities can do for you can’t be done anywhere else in the world.”

Stephanie Green of Hello! Florida adds that one of the reasons why the theme parks are so popular with groups is that they give planners and attendees the chance to do an event that is truly exclusive. “For example, groups can get exclusive use of Epcot at Disney World or the Harry Potter venue at Universal,” she says. “And to be able to be given exclusive access to a particular part of a theme park on a particular night is just something very special. There’s no other way to do it than to be part of a group. And that’s very special. That’s the appeal, because it’s something they’ll remember forever.”

At the same time, however, none of the theme parks rest on their laurels. Each of them is always planning something new and even more spectacular. Walt Disney World Resort, for example, is now working on a new Star Wars-themed land covering 14 acres — the largest single-themed land expansion ever for the resort. Universal is completing the “Skull Island: Reign of Kong” attraction that will debut this summer, paying homage to the monumental King Kong of movie fame; and Volcano Bay, a full-blown water theme park, is coming to Universal in 2017. SeaWorld opens the new “Mako” shark-themed, 200-foot-high roller coaster on June 10 — billed as Orlando’s tallest, fastest and longest roller coaster.

Meanwhile, ever-popular with groups is the nightly Illuminations: Reflections of Earth fireworks exhibit at Disney’s Epcot; and the Wizarding World of Harry Potter’s Hogswmeade and Diagon Alley parks, which are even more enchanting at night.

With all the fantasy and thrills Orlando has to offer, it’s no surprise that the city set an all-time record for overall visitation, with 66 million fun-seekers arriving in 2015, more than any other U.S. destination. As such, meeting planners can be confident that meetings in Orlando will draw enthusiastic support from attendees and stakeholders alike.

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