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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR GLOBAL MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

## DINING TAILORED TO GROUPS

Meeting Planners Are Going  
All-in on Dining Concepts

ALSO  
IN THIS  
ISSUE

PLANNER  
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Matthew Von Ertfelda,  
Senior Vice President  
Food and Beverage,  
Global Operations  
Marriott International

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## Ring in an Optimistic New Year

With the new year upon us, it seems only fitting to think about what 2020 will bring. While the economy is booming and other indicators paint a positive picture, I find it amusing that some comments from those who are never satisfied still reflect a negative picture. It's time for professional meeting planners and others responsible for planning meetings and other events to stand up, take a positive approach, and make 2020 the best year ever. With annual revenues growing, our industry is expected to continue to thrive.

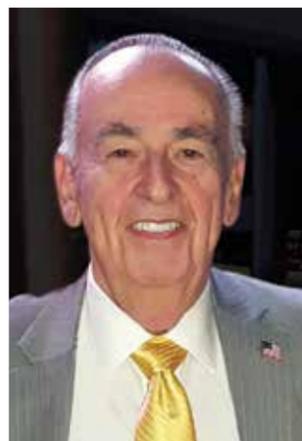
By its very nature, the meeting and incentive travel industry supports other allied business opportunities such as airlines, destination management companies, hotels, resorts and conference and convention centers. By sustaining these other lines of business we will also help our economy to prosper.

We must continue to prove that meetings mean business and are essential to inform, train and educate. Let's not overlook the proven value of incentive travel programs. This serves to motivate employees, to increase productivity and overall perform better. Meetings

and incentive travel programs are an investment, the results of which show up on the bottom line.

In this issue we focus on some popular destinations that merit consideration for your next event. Check out the latest happenings in the Caribbean, Bahamas, Texas, Florida and Las Vegas.

We know the meeting and incentive travel industry is thriving and is expected to go forward. The facts speak for themselves, so let the doomsayers say what they will and to you, our subscribers, I wish you all a very happy, healthy and prosperous New Year!



**Harvey Grotsky**  
Publisher

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**PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
**Harvey Grotsky**

harvey.grotsky@themeetingmagazines.com

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR**  
**Kristin Bjornsen**

kristin.bjornsen@themeetingmagazines.com

**MANAGING EDITOR**  
**Henry Fitzgerald**

henry.fitzgerald@themeetingmagazines.com

**EDITORIAL COORDINATOR**  
**Heather Ballis**

heather.ballis@themeetingmagazines.com

**DIGITAL CONTENT COORDINATOR**  
**Christine Smith**

christine.smith@themeetingmagazines.com

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS**

**Sophia Bennett**  
**Sara Churchville**  
**Cynthia Dial**  
**Maura Keller**  
**Christine Loomis**  
**Derek Reveron**  
**Patrick Simms**  
**David Swanson**

**PRESIDENT & CEO**  
**Harvey Grotsky**

**VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS**  
**David Middlebrook**

david.middlebrook@themeetingmagazines.com

**ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES**

2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120  
Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394  
561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509  
advertising@themeetingmagazines.com

**REGIONAL MANAGER, TEXAS/  
OKLAHOMA/ARKANSAS/LOUISIANA**

**Tim Kedzuch**  
630-728-9204  
tim.kedzuch@themeetingmagazines.com

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For additional information contact:

George Brice

Vice President Group Sales

Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board

George@nipib.com

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NEW CONSTRUCTION

### Construction for Las Vegas' Circa Resort Hits Halfway Mark

LAS VEGAS, NV — Developer Derek Stevens recently announced that his highly anticipated, integrated gaming resort has reached the halfway mark in its 22-month construction process. On track for a December 2020 opening, the project will be the first ground-up gaming resort in historic downtown Las Vegas since 1980. Located on the iconic Fremont Street Experience, the spectacular 1.25 million-sf, 777-room property will stand as the tallest structure north of the Las Vegas Strip. Circa's offerings will include new food and beverage concepts to be announced throughout the year.



SNEAK PEEK

**Harrah's Las Vegas puts attendees in the heart of everything, with its prime location at the center of the Las Vegas Strip and connected to CAESARS FORUM, opening March 2020. With all redesigned stylish, contemporary guest rooms and a stunning designer lobby.**

DESTINATION NEWS

### San Jose Offers Planners Options for Meetings of All Types

SAN JOSE, CA — With more than 4,000 hotel rooms throughout the city, a world-class, 520,000-sf high-tech convention center, and a variety of neighborhoods and experiences to engage any meeting, San Jose, California offers a variety of old and new unique meeting spaces. In addition to managing and operating the San Jose McEnery

Convention Center, Team San Jose also manages several cultural facilities, including four historic theaters: San Jose Civic, Center for the Performing Arts, California Theatre and Montgomery Theater. Each can host indoor and outdoor events, receptions and meetings as well as offer top-quality entertainment from major performers. A local favorite, The Hayes Mansion, provides 33,000 sf of versatile function space, including 24 meeting rooms, a 6,600-sf ballroom, large outdoor spaces and expansive lawns perfect for team building

and craft-able catering. Avaya Stadium, home of Major League Soccer's San Jose Earthquakes, is located adjacent to the San Jose International Airport. It boasts North America's largest outdoor bar, which can host up to 500 people. The stadium can hold 18,000 attendees while offering a wide variety of flexible meeting and event venues amongst its many luxury suites and club seats. The 7UP Epicenter at the stadium offers views of the stadium and the Mt. Hamilton landscape, and can host events and activities for as many as 4,000 people.

NEW CONSTRUCTION

### Margaritaville Lake Resort, Lake Conroe Houston, Opening Summer 2020

THE WOODLANDS, TX — BENCHMARK will operate the first Margaritaville Resort in Texas. The resort will offer an 18-hole golf course, a 3-acre waterpark with a lazy river and

outdoor pools. The resort also will feature 72,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting space. The Margaritaville Lake Resort, Lake Conroe, will be part of Benchmark's signature brand, Benchmark Resorts & Hotels. "Benchmark is very excited to be part of this groundbreaking project that will bring the iconic Margaritaville brand to the Houston market, and to our neighbors throughout the Lone Star State, and beyond," says Alex Cabañas, Benchmark CEO.

RENOVATION

### Sheraton in San Juan Plans Multi-Million Dollar Renovation

SAN JUAN, PR — The Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino is celebrating its 10th anniversary with a \$10 million renovation project that includes its 503 guest rooms, the lobby and bar areas as well as an upgrade to the 35,000 sf of meeting space. Included in the phased redo are enhancements to the hotel's food and beverage offerings as well as to the penthouse Sheraton Club, which features a lounge and an al fresco dining terrace. The property is adjacent to the Puerto Rico Convention Center. It opened in November 2009. The improvements are scheduled to be completed in Q4 2020.

SPECIAL OFFER

### Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa Offers Program for Planners

SAN ANTONIO, TX — Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa, the premier Texas Hill Country resort is offering a 2020 "Texas Two Step" program for meetings. The program includes customized experiences as well as cost-saving meeting options so groups can enjoy an authentic Hill Country visit. "With the new year approaching, we are launching a new meeting offer focusing on teambuilding experiences that groups can only find here in the heart of Texas Hill Country," said John Hernstat, director of sales and marketing at Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa. Depending on group size, planners can choose one or two perks. The resort features the 20,200-sf Independence Ballroom which is complemented by adjacent pre-function space and a 13,000-sf event lawn, as well as the 13,590-sf Hill Country Ballroom which houses receptions for up to 1,800 guests.



Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort Spa and Casino has wrapped up a \$21 million renovation.

Tadeu Brunelli / Hyatt

RENOVATION

### Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort Spa and Casino Completes Renovation

ARUBA — Hyatt Regency Aruba has completed a multiyear, multimillion-dollar renovation. The project started with a \$21 million, top-to-bottom renovation of their 359 rooms and suites. During Q1, the resort is going to elevate their guest experience by remodeling a

43,000-sf area of the resort's beachfront outdoor space. The oasis will include 10 private pool cabanas each with a private entrance and stairway into a sleek, tension edge, adults-only pool designed to make attendees feel as though they are floating on the water. Additional features will include outdoor showers, a beach hut that will house towels for guests, use of the resort's hallmark natural stone walls, and an outdoor space for weddings and events, fully equipped with the latest in audio-visual capabilities.

DESTINATION NEWS

### San Juan's New Entertainment Complex, El Distrito

SAN JUAN, PR — Puerto Rico is a prime destination for meetings, incentives, conferences and events — especially when El Distrito, an immersive, multisensorial, audio-visual and technologically advanced

experience as never seen in the Caribbean opens in the spring. From a 177 room ALOFT hotel, an exhilarating urban zip line, a variety of restaurants, bars, lounges, the first day/night disco, and eight premium movie theaters, the 360,000-sf, state-of-the-art entertainment, retail and dining project combines the best in art, music, technology and hospitality.



El Distrito

Courtesy: El Distrito San Juan

# Top-10 Dining Trends for 2020

BY PATRICK BERWALD



Bold colors and plant-based dining will dominate menus in 2020.

DepositPhotos.com

**B**ENCHMARK is looking to the future with its Top-10 Dining Trends for 2020. The trends were observed by Benchmark's executive chefs and culinary experts at the company's 80 luxury hotels, resorts and restaurants coast to coast, offshore and internationally.

In addition to offering engaging experiences to each and every guest, Benchmark's position on food and beverage is to offer the opportunity to learn, focus on wellness and be part of something greater.

## 2020 Dining Trend #1 | Notorious CBD

The CBD food trend has exploded in the last 12 months. Coffee shops and cafes are now boasting a startling array of offerings infused with CBD oil,

aimed at attracting customers interested in trying new, eco-friendly, plant-based ingredients. Restaurants have also begun to incorporate the oil into their menus, both for drinks and food. CBD-infused drinks are also quickly gaining momentum as serious contenders in the popular beverage market, including: sparkling waters, coffees, teas, energy drinks, beer, wine and mixed alcoholic beverages.

## 2020 Dining Trend #2 | The Plant Ecosystem

More people are choosing to move away from beef, pork and poultry as plant-based food alternatives are being provided for meat and dairy. Chefs are re-creating meat and dairy flavors from non-meat and non-dairy products such as soy, peas, cashews and almonds.

## 2020 Dining Trend #3 | Puffed the Magic Snack

We have always been told chips are an unhealthy snack option and to stay away from them. There are new products on the market, however, that are providing healthier versions of chips. With ingredients such as chickpeas, beets, quinoa and kale, these snacks are going to make 'snacking' OK.

## 2020 Dining Trend #4 | Jackfruit – Now & Beyond

The newest go-to meat substitute is jackfruit. Already being used as an alternative for barbecue pulled pork, jackfruit, from Southeast Asia, is a great source of iron, calcium and B vitamins. The texture mimics pulled pork and will soon become a force in the food industry as a meat alternative.

## 2020 Dining Trend #5 | Fruit Forward

Unique fruit flavors, such as cactus, are taking mixology ideation by storm. Spiny cactus fruits such as prickly pear and dragon fruit are piquing consumer interest. Prickly pear yields a flavorful, ruby-colored juice, while dragon fruit gets attention because of its sweet/sour flavor. Consumers are also exploring bergamot orange, yuzu, calamansi, citron, makrut lime, pomelo, Meyer lemon, blood orange and ugli fruit.

## 2020 Dining Trend #6 | Dairy Remix

Oat milk is now the golden child of alternative milks. It's terrific in coffees, and baristas can barely keep it in stock. So, it makes sense that companies are launching other oat milk products to help minimize the environmental impacts associated with animal husbandry.

## 2020 Dining Trend #7 | Sparkling Results

Sparkling water demand is exploding. Operators looking to harness these trends and turn them into more traffic or higher check averages should offer these beverages and make sure to promote them on social media. By ensuring diners — particularly younger influencers — know what new and exciting drinks are available, operators can count on attracting these new and affluent repeat beverage consumers.

## 2020 Dining Trend #8 | Bright & Bold

Color generates emotional appeal with food — it may be as important as taste. Color and functionality collide with ingredients such as blue algae, beet, matcha and butterfly

“Consumers are now demanding sustainability in packaging. Whether it's swapping out Styrofoam and plastic for paper or bamboo, or buying ingredients from sustainable sources, sustainability will sweep **THE ENTIRE INDUSTRY.**”

pea flower tea, which changes color from blue to purple when acidity is added to it.

## 2020 Dining Trend #9 | More Traceability

Consumers are now demanding sustainability in packaging. Whether it's swapping out Styrofoam and plastic for paper or bamboo, or buying ingredients from sustainable sources, sustainability will sweep the entire industry. The heightened focus on single-use plastics is not just a fad, but a reality that goes beyond the purge of the plastic straw.

## 2020 Dining Trend #10 | Ugly Produce

Food is a terrible thing to waste, and yet 40% of all the food produced in the U.S. goes uneaten because it is imperfect. Now, consumers are finally accepting misshapen and bruised foods as edible. Start-up food companies that send boxes of said fruit and vegetables directly to the customer's home will encourage consumers to buy nutritious produce that tastes fine, but is physically flawed. **C&IT**



## PATRICK BERWALD

Berwald, vice president, Food & Beverage with Benchmark, came to the company with a distinguished, two-decade career of food and beverage leadership. He received his formal culinary training at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, France. He earned his B.S. in Hospitality Administration at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and attended Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, focusing on Hospitality Finance and Marketing. Berwald is active within the American Hotel & Restaurant Association and the National Restaurant Association.



Attendees at a Marriott event watched Marriott chefs cook rib-eye, lamb, Dungeness crab, and paella over open flame for a themed meal.

# DINING TAILORED TO GROUPS

*Planners Are Going All-in on Dining Concepts*

BY SOPHIA BENNETT

Creating exciting dining concepts for groups of all sizes continues to grow in importance as the event industry evolves. “With groups, I think there’s more opportunity to deliver experiences that can not just promote the goals of a particular meeting, but which can be exceptionally experiential,” says Matthew Von Ertfelda, senior vice president, food and beverage, global operations for Marriott International. “Meetings today have to be so much more than they’ve ever been in the past, and the levels of creativity are just going to continue to grow,” he said. “The meeting planners who understand that and also understand that they have to deliver experiences that make meet-

ings absolutely unforgettable — where attendees walk away with not just the key messages of the meeting, but those experiences that drive connections to the company or the venue — are the ones who are going to be successful. Success will be about who can unlock a culture of creativity and artisanship routinely across their brand and hotels.”

Content is still key to creating outstanding meetings, but meals can be a surprisingly important part of reinforcing an event’s theme and creating a lasting and positive impression of a brand or gatherings. Von Ertfelda and other event industry professionals share a wealth of creative ideas for dining concepts that provide much more than a chance to refuel.

## Big vs. Small

To some extent, size matters when it comes to creating great dining experiences for groups. “What’s great about the larger groups as opposed to the smaller ones is you’re able to offer much more selection,” says Donald Ross, vice president of Meeting Operations, Las Vegas for Caesars Entertainment. “If you have 100 people, typically you wouldn’t offer several food stations because it’s just too many. It gets too costly. When you have the larger groups, you have to have so many points of service that you can almost do a food hall.” The ability to offer a wide variety of beer, wine, cocktails and other beverage options is also expanded, he points out.

But bigger isn’t necessarily better. “Large groups present logistical challenges that require painstaking precision, mathematics and the operational excellence of a military maneuver,” says Tiffany Richardson, president of Current Affairs, an event production and planning company in Hawaii. “When quantity of people increases, the quality of food and service can decrease.

When Richardson has large groups, she tends to think about ways to pro-

vide them with multiple dining experiences rather than sticking to the same food service concept for everyone. It elevates the experience, she says, as well as creating diversity in food offerings, increases intimacy, and helps handle issues such as crowd control and risk management. “When you break formidable challenges into manageable sizes, it opens up space for innovation and creativity.”

Meetings today have to be so much more than they’ve ever been in the past, and the levels of creativity are just going to continue to grow.

**MATTHEW VON ERTFELDA**  
Senior Vice President  
Food and Beverage, Global Operations  
Marriott International



Devin Burns, vice president of Food & Beverage for Omni Hotels and Resorts, follows a similar philosophy. “The goal for large events is to make them feel smaller and more intimate,” he says. “This is accomplished by providing enough servers, food and bar stations. This is also done by making sure that the food is as delicious for a group of 1,000 as it is for a group of 20. High-quality meats, local vegetables, creative salads, well-orchestrated wine service

and amazing desserts all go a long way to ensuring a best-in-class, intimate feeling dining experience.”

“The one constant between large and small groups is that you have to think of all the options you need no matter the size of the group, such as any allergies and how to have options to fit the whole crowd,” says Kelly Biggs, director of sales at Jackson & Company, a full-service event planning and catering company in Houston, Texas. “Smaller groups focus on details other than food offerings as well, and thus you have to think of the whole experience for them.” That includes seating arrangements, napkin and tablecloth colors, room décor and people’s comfort level.

“A key question to ask yourself is what type of arrangements — menu, service style, room setup — are going to provide your group with the best overall experience,” Burns says. “Some of the fundamentals are the same regardless of the size of the group. For example, the service should always be thoughtful and friendly. Hot food should always be served hot, on time and delicious. However, other elements should be varied based on the size of the group, including number of service staff, and the number of stations and bars should be adjusted to the size of the group. There is nothing worse for the attendee or the venue than to have an amazing food or mixology station not being enjoyed because of long lines or inadequate staffing.”

### Dining That Reflects a Theme

Group meals present a great opportunity to illustrate the themes and content being abstractly discussed during a meeting. At a recent event for Marriott general managers in Seattle, attendees were sharing ideas for low-impact meetings and gatherings that make smart

Large groups give planners an opportunity to get creative not only with preparing food, but serving it as well.

use of outdoor space. For dinner one night, the local events team organized live fire cooking along the banks of the Port Orchard River, which ran next to the picturesque event venue. Attendees watched Marriott chefs cook rib-eye, locally raised whole lamb, Dungeness crab, and paella over the flames. “A local farmer even brought in a mobile garden that allowed attendees to snip greens for their own customized salad,” Von Ertfelda says. “It was an unforgettable experience from an F&B perspective. It took advantage of the natural beauty of the surroundings. It eliminated the boundary between the chefs and the artisans and the attendees. Attendees could talk to the chefs and feel the live-fire experience in a way that would be impossible in a traditional meeting setting.” When the event concluded, the reusable dishes were washed and the embers were tossed into Puget Sound, making it a ‘leave no trace’ opportunity that spoke directly to the event’s theme.

At a sustainability-focused event Von Ertfelda attended, the Marriott operator put a sign with a QR code next to each food station. “Attendees would click on it and they would get a video with a story behind the dish and how it spoke to sustainability,” he says. “We’re always thinking about, ‘How do you unlock a narrative behind the food and behind the event that jives with the broader purpose of a meeting?’”

### Dining as an Experience

‘Experiential’ is the hottest word in events right now, and mealtime can definitely be a moment to give people an experience they’ll never forget. When Marriott hosted a meeting for managers in Washington, D.C., the team gave



Photo by Joy Asico / Courtesy Omni Hotels & Resorts

participants a totally unexpected sight when they entered the dining room for dinner — a bowhunter displaying a snakehead, an invasive, eel-like fish now commonly found in the Potomac River. Once attendees got over their shock, they could talk to the hunter about his sport and the fish’s impact on the local ecosystem. When dinner was served, everyone sat down to a portion of snakehead on their plate, so they could try eating the fish and learn about how consuming invasive species has become an important part of their management in venues around the world.

“If you want attendees to pay atten-



Courtesy Omni Hotels & Resorts

Planners and chefs should team up to ensure meals are as delicious for 1,000 attendees as they are for 20 attendees.

tion to something, you need a headline,” Von Ertfelda says. “You have to shock them. I think it was pretty shocking for attendees to walk in and see a bowhunter with a bow. But then to have this delicious meal and this interesting conversation — it really made an impact.”

For a recent corporate event, Richardson staged a celebrity-chef-versus-resort-chef competition. The chefs did a key ingredient challenge similar to the ones done on a popular Food Network show. It was a huge hit.

“In another experience, we created a dessert reveal in which drapes parted to present an aerialist performance,” she says. “Behind her, a giant round table that was about 20 feet in diameter was lowered from the ceiling brimming with desserts. A pastry chef was on hand to serve.” Don’t forget, she adds, “Clients and attendees want elevated experiences where food is art and entertainment. Today’s attendee eats with their eyes. We all crave food that’s worthy of Instagram.”

Memorable experiences don’t have to be so over-the-top. Richardson has also had good luck with putting a fresh twist on more traditional dining options. “For groups that have already enjoyed a typical luau, we have reimagined the experience with a new expression,” she says. “It could be a luau that returns to authenticity and heralds

Mealtime can be a moment to give attendees an experience they won’t soon forget.



Photo Courtesy Current Affairs

back to a more ancestral experience with floor seating and ancient Hawaiian lawn games. It could also be a more artistic interpretation of an all-white luau or black-light experiences.”

### Other Trends in Group Dining

Food can be a powerful way to tell a story. Richardson uses that to her advantage when putting together memorable meal concepts. “In an experience where attendees have traveled to multiple islands in Hawaii, we’ve planned a finale evening where each course stars a food or ingredient that’s significant or sacred to a specific island of their visit.”

Dining experiences that reflect local cuisines and cultures are still very popular with today’s event attendees. “As people’s tastes become increasingly sophisticated and cosmopolitan, there’s an ongoing movement to bring forward what’s locally loved,” Richardson says. “We always have to be ahead of the trend in curating the next adventure.” For events in Hawaii, she’s arranged for spam musubi to be served alongside a short rib musubi, or tofu poké to be served in addition to the traditional fish dish. “Those small elements of surprise delight attendees.”

Von Ertfelda describes an F&B event that stood out during a meeting of Marriott managers in Cancún. One focus of that meeting was driving local relevance with groups that came to the property. To illustrate that, the staff put together a Mexican carnival to coincide with dinner one night.

“They built a Lucha Libre wrestling venue in the middle of this outdoor venue and orchestrated Mexican street food around it,” Von Ertfelda says. The exposure to local food and local culture served as an excellent example of how hotel managers could bring the flavor of their area to guests at their property.

With larger groups come more diverse dietary limitations and preferences. It’s important to offer foods that will appeal to all eaters. “Back in the day, if we were having a meal and somebody wanted a vegetarian meal, you’d just give them a bunch of

We always have to be ahead of the trend in curating the next adventure.

**TIFFANY RICHARDSON**  
President  
Current Affairs



vegetables,” Ross says. “That doesn’t fly anymore. Put as much effort into vegetarian meals as non-vegetarian meals. Everyone eating in the dining room should have an equal experience. When we do tastings now, we focus as much on the vegetarian and vegan entrées. We’re also labeling food to let people know what they’re eating.”

Trends in how food is served are important to pay attention to as well. The days of having big, plated dinners are over, Ross says. “Unless you’re doing an awards dinner, people are going to be more interested in buffets

Dining experiences that reflect local cuisines and cultures are increasingly popular with today’s event attendees.

and receptions because they want to move around the dining room. They want to network and talk. That’s why food stations are becoming so popular.”

Von Ertfelda is also a fan of food stations because they help the dining portion of events be more interactive, social and conducive to collaboration. “They give you more control of food waste and the ability to bring local artisans and authentic culinary and mixology techniques forward in a more fun, animating way for attendees,” he adds.

Another alternative to plated dinners is serving food family style. There are some fun twists that can be used as an alternative to passing heaping platters from person to person. “Having unique food displays that are slightly raised above the centerpieces on each table encourages more conversation and culinary exploration,” Richardson says. “It encourages guests to make connections across the dinner table.”

Says Burns, “I’m a big fan of varying the styles of service within a meal. For example, start the meal with a feasting board of bread, meats, cheeses and spreads pre-set on each table. Then moving to a table-side tossed salad, followed by a traditional plated and served entrée which is accompanied by family style sides. Then to finish it all off, why not add a dessert action station presented as a grand unveiling to ‘wow’ and nightcap the perfect event.”

Biggs says strolling dinners are popular in Houston right now. Guests are guided through various stations serving appetizers, first courses, salads, soups, entrees and desserts. What makes this concept different from the typical buffet is that she focuses on creating interactive ‘chef stations’ where the guests can watch the professional at work. Being able to ask questions and garner information from these experts beats standing over a standard chafing dish any day. **C&IT**

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# TECH TRENDS

## Embrace the Future With These Latest Meeting Planner Trends

BY PATRICK SIMMS

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A sign of the widespread integration of technology into the meeting experience comes from a respondent quoted in the American Express Meetings & Events' 2020 Global Meetings and Events Forecast. Mobile apps, says the meeting professional, have become "the new lanyards." Like lanyards, apps are ubiquitous at conventions, trade shows and many corporate meetings. But of course, their functionality is far greater, facilitating attendee communication and networking, document delivery, engagement, surveys and much more.

In the report, Linda McNairy, global vice president at American Express Global Business Travel – Meetings & Events, in Jersey City, New Jersey, gives an example of app usage from her own experience: "We recently used a 'getting to know you' Q&A in our mobile app for our customer council meeting. One key question was 'How many of our council meetings have you attended? We seeded this question knowing that our new global M&E leader would answer 'First time.' We then segmented the group, based on answers, and created team gamification challenges. This exercise worked well to foster a fun and competitive spirit between leadership and clients, driving deeper engagement with this very important group." Given the versatility of apps as a meeting tool, it is not surprising that their use "to support meetings and events continues to rise around the world," McNairy says.

Shana Hoy, CMP, CMM, event manager at Husch Blackwell LLP in Kansas City, Missouri, and her team deploy the e2m Enterprise Event App to support one of the company's annual meetings. The product offers a full suite of tools, including: polling, a social media wall, personalized agendas, gamification, a chatbot and a videobot and more. "We utilize a lot of the different functionalities of the app, but not necessarily all of them at this point," says Hoy, whose team "looked at eight to 10 different products that had our list of must-haves and like-to-haves, and did demos of a couple of others before we settled" on e2m. She



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**Mobile apps have become an integral and indispensable part of the meetings and events industry.**

offers a word of caution to the consumer in this area. "I will say in the last couple of years I feel like off-the-shelf app providers have maybe over-promised and under-delivered on what is included and what can be done. When we get into the nitty-gritty of the app, they say 'We didn't know you meant this' function." For example, she has found limitations in the wayfinding ability of certain apps, allowing users to wayfind in the exhibit portion, but not within the 'maps' portion of the tool.

### APP-ASSISTED ENGAGEMENT

Attendee engagement is one of the most dynamic functions of meeting technology today, and meeting apps are supporting that objective, often via gamification. "The creative tools we are seeing are games inside of an app, including trivia challenges, scavenger hunts and others that encourage competition amongst attendees," McNairy says.

Among the most robust gamification tools is the SocialPoint Audience Engagement Platform, created by Interactive Meeting Technology LLC. The platform can be integrated into popular event apps such as CrowdCompass. SocialPoint includes a variety of games that drive different goals. For example, attendees can gain points by attending sessions or demos where they learn about certain products or services. Many attendees will participate just in order to earn points, but in doing so, they often realize "Oh, we actually need

this,' and so then the client is delighted because they got the people into the room," explains Samuel J. Smith, managing director of Minneapolis, Minnesota-based Interactive Meeting Technology. "Here's the session title, or here's what it's about, wasn't enough of a draw, but that game added an extra incentive to get people in."

As in many engagement-oriented games, the points lead to prizes, but an innovation within SocialPoint is the concept of intermediate prizes, which attendees can win even if they are not point leaders. "We put a big prize wheel in the lounge, for example, and then attendees can spin the wheel if they earn enough points. So the game will actually tell them, you've earned X number of spins," Smith says. "Here's why that's powerful: From an engagement point of view, if you have a three-day game you need to keep everybody engaged, not just the people who are the top winners. Someone on Day 1 might earn enough points to boost ahead of everybody, but someone who's just discovered the game on Day 2 can still win a good prize."

Apart from gamification, apps can support engagement by integrating audience polling or Q&A functions. "The majority of our clients who deploy a mobile app use polling. Polling can be included in an event mobile app or as a

standalone product, and we are seeing more and more innovation around these standalone mobile tools,” McNairy says. “We had one client who used polling in advance of a meeting to create breakout groups moving through the activities of the meeting. The overall meeting was bringing together two companies following a merger, so the polling provided a mechanism to bring people together in a networking environment and enable them to emerge from the meeting with a heightened level of engagement.”

There are numerous providers and products to choose from in this area, including more than a hundred live polling vendors, Smith notes. “But it’s also about how to get the tools to be utilized at the conference — that’s the challenge.” In some cases, the old pen-and-paper approach to live surveys works better. “We do use SurveyMonkey,” Hoy says, “but in all honesty, in a live program I feel like attendees are more apt to answer the six to nine questions about your program quickly before they head out of the room. So we’ve found that having that sheet of paper and having them checkmark the boxes actually gives us a higher percentage of return than trying to send something out to them after the program.” Hoy also cites “an uptick in usage of Poll Everywhere by our speakers in the last couple of years. We’ve seen both the flexibility

and professional look of the product increase in recent years. One of the polls you can do is a word cloud, asking what is the biggest challenge you’re facing in a particular area, and they put up different words. This assists the speaker to guide the narrative live.”

## MEASURING ENGAGEMENT BIOLOGICALLY

The level of participation attendees demonstrate in games and polls is certainly one important metric of engagement. But technology is also facilitating a more direct measurement of engagement via biometric data, e.g., facial cues.

It’s also about how to get the tools to be utilized at the conference — that’s the challenge.

**SHANA HOY, CMP, CMM**  
Event Manager, Husch Blackwell LLP



It has been argued that these kinds of metrics, since they are based in unconscious responses, are better indicators of attendees’ actual engagement as well as learning. “While surveys have a role, research shows that self-reports are only 17% accurate at predicting outcomes like information recall and sales growth after training,” says Devin Carver, CMP, director of sales and marketing with Bishop-

McCann in Kansas City, Missouri. “Decisions are largely made in unconscious, emotional brain regions.” It is thus highly valuable to be able to “distinguish what people say they ‘like’ from what their brains ‘love,’” Carver adds.

One example of a leader in the biometric technology area is Zenus, a Houston, Texas-based company that offers a mountable camera that analyzes facial cues relevant to engagement without actually ‘recognizing’ or identifying attendees. Identification is needed for registration, of course, and facial recognition technology is also applicable for that purpose. “The facial recognition processing time is still being fine-tuned, and there are still a few challenges with the technology, but ultimately, registration is more efficient with facial recognition,” Carver maintains. “Check-in is much quicker because there is no fumbling with tickets or identification, and it’s more secure. Besides streamlining the registration process, facial recognition also provides better overall event security. This technology makes it possible for event planners and program managers to strengthen security if needed, map user behavior and monitor attendee engagement levels without inconveniencing attendees.”

A new, wearable form of biometric technology comes from a partnership between Bishop-McCann and Immersion Neuroscience. The product, known as Immersion Events, consists of an app paired with a wristband neurosensor that consistently captures subtle changes in cardiac rhythm that indicate changes in attention, and both conscious and unconscious emotional responses. The data is sent to the cloud, allowing meeting hosts and speakers to evaluate, in real time, what aspects of the event are creating the most engagement among participants, whether a certain presentation, message, networking location and so on.

**Planners can gather biometric data via wearable devices, but attendees may become self-conscious about them and affect the results.**

Planners may be concerned that attendees will become self-conscious wearing such a device, which in turn may inhibit the measurement of their natural responses. But Carver points out that it’s easy to forget one is wearing the band. In addition, “We most often review the data in aggregate because we’re looking for overall event trends. Thus, attendees have no need to worry about being singled out based on their specific reactions. Moreover, the solution only requires 30-35 attendees wearing the device to get robust and reliable results, so if you’re at a conference with thousands, more than likely you can find plenty of advocates to wear the band.”

## VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Hybrid and virtual meetings are on the rise in North America and Europe, according to the 2020 Global Meetings and Event Forecast. “When comparing the 2019 survey results to the 2020 results of the percentage of planners who use hybrid/virtual meetings in more than 10% of meetings, North America has seen an uptick in that number, going from 43% to 58%,” McNairy reports. “Europe has seen an even larger increase, jumping from 49% to 66%. Central and South America, on the other hand, had a slight decrease from 76% to 71%, and Asia Pacific also had a slight decrease, from 70% to 66%.”

Husch Blackwell’s meetings operations reflect the North American trend. Hoy notes that “about a third” of the company’s meetings are currently virtual, “which is definitely up from recent years.” The company has been using ON24 as its Webinar platform for about four years. “It’s definitely a very professional-based product. I think the user experience is very clean, easy to use, and we’re able to brand it,” she says.

One of the features of ON24 she finds most convenient is Simulive, where presenters pre-record all presentation materials and deliver them to an audience at a designated date and time. The presenter can then interact with the



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**North America has seen an uptick in virtual meetings, while the number of virtual meetings has fallen in the Asia-Pacific region.**

audience through live text Q&A. Sim2-Live allows interaction through both live text Q&A and via ON24-provided phone bridges. “We had a case not too long ago where we set a date for a live program and something came up and the speaker could not participate live. We were able to work with the product to switch it to Simulive, record the speaker a couple of days ahead of time and still have it be played during the live program time,” Hoy says.

A new product on the market this year that supports small hybrid meetings is Microsoft Surface Hub 2S. The successor to Surface Hub has a much sleeker, 50-inch rotating touchscreen that enables video chatting with

## MEETING MANAGEMENT

Among the latest tech tools that support the logistical side of planning is EventTraX, offered by One10 Marketing, a Minneapolis, Minnesota-based meetings and incentive company. According to Patty Ely, One10 senior business analyst: “One of our high-tech clients expressed a need for a comprehensive way for conference organizers to manage suppliers and track all equipment items needed at a conference event venue by individual room.

One10 developed an online tool, EventTraX, to ensure the proper equipment is available from the right supplier, in the right place, at the right time, from event set up to event tear down.” The tool enables the user to assign each equipment item a timing code that determines

Research shows that self-reports are only 17% accurate at predicting outcomes like information recall and sales growth after training.

**DEVIN CARVER, CMP**  
Director, Sales and Marketing  
Bishop-McCann



team members who appear life sized. Mounted on a custom-built Steelcase rolling stand, the Surface Hub 2S features Windows 10, Microsoft Teams, Office 365, Microsoft Whiteboard and the intelligent cloud. For companies that regularly stage team meetings with virtual participants and high-tech needs, investing in this state-of-the-art collaborative tool, which is priced at about \$9,000, may be justified.

when the item must be available for use in the room, and when it must be removed from the room. “EventTraX proved to be so beneficial to the client that One10 is now enhancing the product to include food and beverage tracking as well,” Ely adds.

Hoy’s team recently appropriated a project management tool, Wrike, to support companywide meetings oversight. The tool replaced the Word and



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Photo Courtesy Samuel J. Smith

At a recent Cisco Live event, attendees participated in an electronic trivia game to win prizes.

company has recently implemented the help desk software Zendesk to provide AI-mediated replies to FAQs addressed to various service groups, including Meetings & Events.

Johnson notes that she looks forward to a revamp of the Cvent platform expected this year. Currently, the intake form “resides on a portal with a hyperlink that says ‘click here for the meeting request form.’ It can’t be a designed icon, for example. People don’t have time to read; but they do go right to an icon and there’s not iconic graphics right now, so that’s a limitation. Cvent says they’re going to make the ‘look’ and ‘feel’ better, and the intake form itself will be more robust and have conditional logic for a better user experience.”

Last month, Cvent enhanced its platform through a partnership with miMeetings, a leading provider of managed ground transportation solutions for meetings and events. According to Cvent, planners can now source, select and compare multiple ground transportation vendor bids and negotiate pricing directly within the Cvent platform; eliminate transportation errors with patented flight validation through real-time FAA connectivity; and leverage comprehensive post-event accounting and reporting by incorporating ground transportation spend directly into Cvent’s budgeting tools.

The best tech tools on the market, like the Cvent platform, are regularly evolving in response to planner needs. Hoy has provided feedback to tech providers she works with, and says that in many cases her suggested changes have been incorporated. “I don’t know that any product is perfect, but a lot of them are really close,” she says. Sometimes, instead of shopping for a new event app or meeting management software tool, it pays to stick with a familiar product and push for a little improvement. **C&IT**

Excel docs that were being used to track ‘to-do’ items and the event pipeline, which includes more than 250 events per year. “I’m really excited about Wrike because we’ll be able to set up templates, so when a new event comes in you can pop that template in and assign it to one of the event planners on the team. I, as a manager, can go in and see where they’re at in the process and see if they’re falling behind or if someone has additional availability,” Hoy explains. “And each team member can customize those checklists and then have a daily summary across all their events.”

American Express Meetings & Events offers meeting management tools such as Attendify and Meetings Express. Planners using these tools benefit from “a complete view of all attendee records, event data, and custom fields from integrations all in one place,” McNairy says. “All of our solutions drive key data into Meetings Insights, our data and reporting platform, so that we can enable valuable insights for our customers into both their individual meetings or events as well as across their entire meetings program.”

The most comprehensive approach to companywide meeting management is of course the strategic meetings management program (SMMP), and a tech platform is indispensable

to such a program. Cvent, the major player in this space, offers a scalable, automated platform that supports the SMMP at Northbrook, Illinois-based UL LLC, a global safety, sustainability and security certification company. “A group outside of our team built their own in-house, central calendar for just their events, but their system is not enterprise-wide and there were no triggers, automation and workflows underneath it all, and that’s something that’s really needed,” explains Victoria Johnson, CMP, CMM, global man-

When somebody registers an event in the Cvent platform, an internal company can customize all of the workflows so they can be triggered.

**VICTORIA JOHNSON, CMP, CMM**  
Global Manager, Strategic Meetings Management,  
Global Meetings & Events Services at UL LLC



ager, Strategic Meetings Management, Global Meetings & Events Services at UL. “When somebody registers an event in the Cvent platform, an internal company can customize all of the workflows so they can be triggered. For example, if sourcing is needed, it’s triggered to the sourcing group. So it’s an intake form that’s scalable, automated and customizable.” UL’s Meetings & Events Services group also fields various requests and FAQs not handled through Cvent, and the

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# PARADISE FOUND

The Islands of the Bahamas  
and the Caribbean Offer Plenty of  
Sun-Splashed Destinations and Venues

BY SOPHIA BENNETT

The promise of hot sun, sandy beaches and beautiful scenery is enough to lure many planners to the islands of the Bahamas, Caribbean and Puerto Rico. But there are plenty of other reasons to plan a meeting or incentive trip in this area.

“Who doesn’t get excited about a visit to the Caribbean?” asks Carolina Voulleme León, director of Sales and Marketing at the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino. “A trip to a tropical island is a big motivator for incentive trips, and further excites corporate groups for their event. We tend to see attendees in high spirits and really enjoying themselves, which ultimately enhances the overall ambiance of their corporate event.”

Given that tourism is a major focus in the region, there are plenty of properties for planners to consider. The hospitality provided by locals is unmatched. Foodies will revel in the local cuisine, and attendees excited to learn about different cultures can do it without traveling too far from home.

## BAHAMAS

Mabelle Catania, director of Sales and Marketing for the SLS Baha Mar in Nassau, provides a summary of the Bahamas’ geography and attractiveness to planners. “The Bahamas is an archipelago with more than 700 islands and cays starting just 50 miles southeast of the coast of Florida. It is a safe and welcoming destination. Easily accessible from many cities in the United States, the Bahamas are just a 35-minute flight from Miami and less than three hours from New York City. With hundreds of direct flights from major cities including Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas and Denver, as well as Canada and the U.K., the Bahamas is an unbeatable location to host meetings and incentive groups.”

“Nassau is an ideal meeting and incentive destination in the Caribbean that feels remote while also being easily accessible,” says Braedan Quigley, director of Sales and Marketing at Grand Hyatt Baha Mar. “International companies with a global presence also appreciate its excellent international flight

access and relaxed visa requirements for visitors from Asian countries. Corporate and incentive travelers seeking an international destination with its own distinct culture and vibe who also value modern amenities necessary for business travel — high-speed Wi-Fi, bilingual hotel staff, infrastructure to host large-scale events — appreciate the ‘best of both worlds’ atmosphere the Caribbean offers.”

The Grand Hyatt Baha Mar is an 1,800-room hotel that features the Caribbean’s largest casino, the Caribbean’s first and only flagship ESPA spa, the 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Royal Blue Golf Course and Racquet Club, six multilevel pools and more than 40 food



balconies for enjoying the nice weather.

“The convention center’s meeting space is incredible, as there is a lot to work with,” Baumann says. “The sales office provided excellent support throughout the planning process. We understand that the process takes a village, and their willingness to listen helped quell our worries for the event. While on property, we always had one direct on-site contact, who proved to be absolutely great. He was incredibly responsive and truly understood our program and what we were trying to achieve. We were also pleased with the resort’s catering capabilities — the presentation, timing and taste were fantastic.”

and beverage outlets. The adjacent Performing Arts and Convention Center offers 200,000 sf of flexible indoor and outdoor spaces.

Norma Baumann, a senior account manager at BI Worldwide, worked with a large company to host its President’s Club at the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar last summer. The nearly 1,800 guests who attended had an outstanding experience.

“As we were planning a President’s Club event, the quality of lodging had to be suitable for our attendees,” she says. “With 1,800 luxury rooms, Grand Hyatt Baha Mar had the inventory to keep our entire group together, and the high-end resort feel was aligned with what we were looking for.” Guests appreciated the Bahamian-inspired artwork and colors in the airy rooms, many of which had ocean views and

**Grand Hyatt Baha Mar features the Caribbean’s largest casino and more than 40 F&B outlets.**

SLS Baha Mar features 299 guest rooms, 109 of which are suites, and several dining and drinking options, including Skybar, the only rooftop lounge in the Caribbean. It shares many of the amenities located on the Baha Mar properties, including the spa, casino, golf course, championship racquet club and luxury stores. The hotel itself has 12,000 sf of event space.

The Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) recently took 280 incentive travel professionals to Baha Mar for its annual SITE Classic, a fundraiser to support research and education in the industry. “Baha Mar is simply breathtaking — from the art-filled spaces to the views of fountains,



A Junkanoo Band at Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas is just one of the many activities attendees can enjoy at the resort.

beaches, palm trees and pools, and an overall vibe that ranges from the action of the casino to the serenity of the ocean breezes,” says Tahira Endean, CMP, CED, DES, the organization’s head of events. “The resort destination itself is fantastic, and the infrastructure to support incentive programs internally and with DMC and ground support exceeds expectations.”

The setting, food and overall hospitality provided by the staff were described as highlights of the hotel. The property also provided guests with some pretty memorable experiences, including flamingo yoga on the lawn, learning about and tasting local bush teas, and taking painting classes from the resident artists at Baha Mar’s art space, The Current Gallery & Art Center.

The group wanted to do a CSR activity, and they found a deeply meaningful experience in helping victims of Hurricane Dorian. “We worked with one of our DMC partners, Cacique International, who identified six shelters in need of helping hands,” Endean says. A large portion of the group spent one afternoon sorting clothing, building closets, warehousing food, cleaning and handing out supplies, and washing and walking dogs.

Outside of Nassau, the ethereal-looking Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas is another option for meeting planners. The resort features five hotels — one of which is similar in appearance

to artists’ renderings of the Lost City. Offerings include: a casino, spa, golf course designed by Tom Weiskopf, 20 swimming areas, beach access, regular live shows and plenty of other entertainment options.

The insurance company WoodmenLife held its 2019 incentive trip at Atlantis. People who had reached the President’s Club level stayed for four nights; those at the President’s Cabinet level were given an entire week at the property.

“WoodmenLife is a very family-oriented company,” says Jodi Lilly, corporate meeting coordinator. “Atlantis attracted our group because of the multiple activities available to guests of all ages without having to ever leave the property.” For example, the resort has a 141-acre water park called the Aquaven-

The resort destination itself is fantastic, and the infrastructure to support incentive programs internally and with DMC and ground support exceeds expectations.

**TAHIRA ENDEAN, CMP, CED, DES**  
Head of Events  
SITE



ture, has a water-play fort, multiple water slides and pools, and a lazy river. The resort is very focused on marine conservation, so there is an area that houses rescued dolphins and sea lions and engages in marine rehabilitation activities.

Everything about the event, which drew 750 people, went very well, according to Lilly. “All of our meeting rooms, events and food stations

were set up on time and as requested. I also loved the two assistants that were designated to our group. Atlantis is very focused on providing authentic Bahamian experiences for their guests. From Junkanoo to local cuisine, everyone gets to learn something about the beautiful traditions they have here.”

According to Catania, temperatures are great year-round, she says, the islands experience their lowest temperatures from December to the beginning of March. Travelers wanting to find deals should book from September to mid-November.

“Those interested in local Bahamian traditions who also want to escape the cold should visit in December to experience Junkanoo, the largest street parade across the island, featuring traditional music and colorful, elaborate costumes,” Quigley says. Junkanoo bands can be hired to provide entertainment at events throughout the year.

### CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean also offers great air-lift, a number of high-quality properties and interesting cultural experiences. The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic has more than 1,700 guest rooms and 65,000 sf of indoor meeting space. This all-inclusive resort includes a casino, bowling alleys, escape rooms, award-winning golf course, fun activities for kids, a full-fledged spa and

13 different swimming pools.

“In Punta Cana, high season basically is the beginning of the year to just after Easter,” says Kevin Edmunds, vice president of meetings & incentives for AIC Hotel Group, which owns the property. He recommends visiting in May, before schools are out for the summer and tourism increases, and in September, when rates are favorable and warm

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Photo by Gabrielle Reyes

**The Caribe Hilton was the ideal venue for NetHope's annual Global Summit, in which more than 500 attendees participated in the event.**

damaged by hurricanes. The Renaissance, which is expected to fully reopen this year, made changes to its guest rooms, dining areas, lobby and other public areas, and outdoor landscaping. Local artwork and artisan products are highlighted in the updated spaces. The Ritz-Carlton, which reopened to full capacity in the fall, has made significant upgrades to its guest rooms, meeting space, lobby and dining facilities. There is a new, family swimming pool with a splash pad and luxury pool cabanas.

### PUERTO RICO

“Puerto Rico is a great place for groups because it offers diverse topography with beach, city and rainforest all within a pretty short drive; great authentic cuisine; friendly locals; and a rich culture that can be felt through its music, food, art and celebrations,” says Betty Gonzalez, communications manager for the Caribe Hilton. “San Juan is just a short flight from many major U.S. cities, including New York, Miami, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta and Boston. English is widely spoken. There’s no currency exchange and no passports required.

Here, groups get the benefit of an exotic, tropical escape without the hassle of having to travel abroad.”

The Caribe Hilton remains one of the island’s most iconic properties. It was the first Hilton hotel outside of the continental U.S., and is the birthplace of the piña colada. Last year, the property wrapped up a \$150 million renovation that included changes to all 652 guest rooms, pools and landscaping, the spa and its 11 dining concepts.

Late last year, Fairfax, Virginia-based NetHope, a collective that focuses on improving IT connectivity among humanitarian organizations, hosted its annual Global Summit at Caribe Hilton. More than 500 participants spent

weather is still abundant. The Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino has 414 recently-renovated guest rooms and suites, including the largest sleeping rooms on the island, and more than 26,000 sf of indoor and outdoor special event space. In the past two years, the property has made upgrades to the adults-only Tradewinds Club, dining facilities, Bazaar gift shop, fitness center and outdoor spaces. Updates to the porte cochere and ballrooms are planned for this year. The rooms and suites will get another face-lift in two years.

“The beauty of Aruba is that it’s located below the hurricane belt, which means that our weather is fairly constant year-round,” Voullieme León says. “Group planners especially love this since it significantly reduces the chances of unfortunate weather disrupting an event.”

The Marriott recently put together an experience where guests can re-create a traditional Aruban dish called keshi yena, which is a ball of cheese stuffed with spiced meat. “We’ve worked with groups to bring the outdoor setting of Aruba indoors and have even gone as far as to bring a jeep into a conference room and set up tables surrounding the vehicle with food displayed on the jeep,” Voullieme León says. “Carnival is an island-wide tradition that takes place every February, where the streets are filled with parades, over-the-top costumes and lively music. We re-create this on a smaller scale every Thursday at our La Vista restaurant for leisure guests, though we can incorporate the ‘Carnival’ theme into a private dinner or special event for a local touch.”

Half Moon, located on a 400-acre plot of beachfront property in Jamaica, recently plans to open a new luxury resort experience called Eclipse at Half Moon in spring. It will include 57 guest rooms

The region is well positioned with infrastructure and hotel and resort properties to accommodate a diverse slate of meetings, conventions and events.

**ELIZABETH BAMBER**  
Event Manager  
NetHope



and suites, four new dining venues and a spa offering massages and yoga classes.

“Jamaica is a stunning and culturally-rich destination with access to direct flights from North America, the U.K. and Europe,” says general manager Shernette Crichton. “With such travel ease, visitors may take advantage of what Jamaica and, in particular, Half Moon, have to offer. We are looking forward to introducing a new and highly-anticipated luxury experience that will surely cement Half Moon’s position as one of the Caribbean’s most iconic resort destinations.”

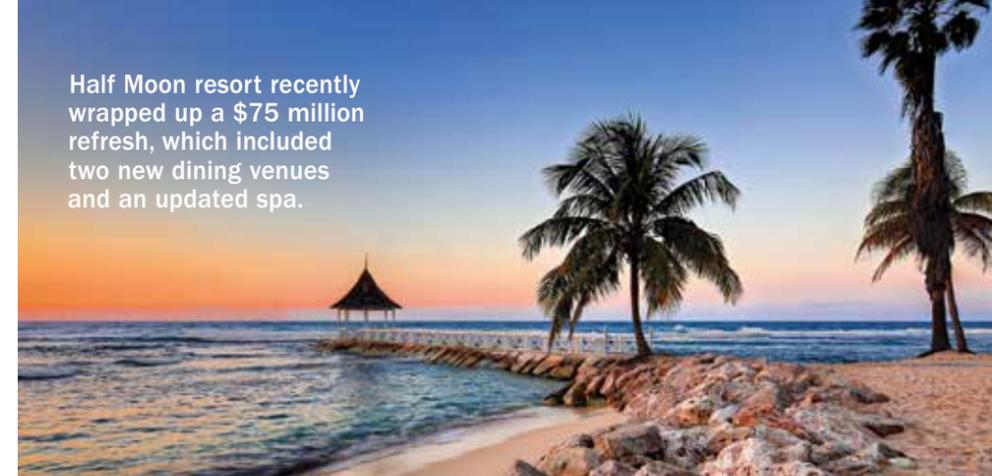
Both the Renaissance St. Croix Cambola Beach Resort & Spa and Ritz-Carlton, St. Thomas have undertaken extensive renovations since they were

five days hearing from keynote speakers, attending breakout sessions and workshops, networking and engaging in community service projects.

“NetHope was drawn to Puerto Rico as a Summit destination given our work in the region during the response and recovery to Hurricanes Maria and Irma,” says event manager Elizabeth Bamber. “In March of 2018 — less than six months after the hurricanes — we conducted an extensive site visit to six hotels and determined the Caribe Hilton offered us the best of the best. Though the property was under extensive repair and renovation, the location and campus were unparalleled. The potential of what Caribe Hilton could offer for meeting space, guest rooms and amenities was clear.”

Bamber never regretted that decision. “Coming from a hotel background, I am very aware of the training and support it takes to create and sustain an excellent team of service professionals. Caribe Hilton has succeeded in delivering this team at every level and in every department. From the banquet and bar staff to the bellmen, concierge and front desk, along with housekeeping and the resort staff, I was extremely well cared for as

Half Moon resort recently wrapped up a \$75 million refresh, which included two new dining venues and an updated spa.



Roberto Bonardi / Half Moon Resort

a planner and our guests as attendees.”

One of the highlights of the event is always the NetHope Community Celebration, which highlights the organization’s partners as well as the culture, people, cuisine and music of the host community. “This year’s celebration — held on-property — was beautifully themed, with local musicians, regional cuisine and the Caribe Hilton’s signature piña colada,” Bamber says. Interactive DMC Puerto Rico was an important partner in sourcing and executing the celebration.

NetHope also offered attendees the opportunity to volunteer for service projects with local nonprofits. Activi-

ties included: home remodeling and repair, tree planting, farm labor assistance and helping to clean up and revitalize a school severely damaged by Hurricane Maria.

Bamber highly recommends the Caribbean as a whole in addition to the Caribe Hilton. “The region is well positioned with infrastructure and hotel and resort properties to accommodate a diverse slate of meetings, conventions and events,” she says. “Its natural beauty, rich cultures and welcoming citizens are an additional bonus to any planner or attendee experience.”

Puerto Rico is a prime destination for meetings, incentives, conferences and events — and will be more so especially when El Distrito opens in the spring. The district will feature a zip line, restaurants, bars, lounges, the first day/night disco and eight premium movie theaters. The 360,000-sf state-of-the-art entertainment, retail and dining project combines the best in art, music, technology and hospitality.

“A perfect visit to Puerto Rico isn’t complete without checking out the beautiful beaches, bustling Old San Juan city center, and El Yunque rainforest, which is home to lots of local wildlife,” Gonzalez says. “There are also great under-the-radar neighborhoods and towns like Santurce, Calle Loiza and La Perla that are worth visiting when you want to go more off-the-beaten-path. We’re known for having one of the longest festive seasons, with celebrations that run from Christmas through February. The entire city comes alive this time of year. And, Caribe is known for having one of the biggest and best New Year’s Eve parties on the island.”

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

### PUERTO RICO TO HOST 2020 WORLD TRAVEL AND TOURISM COUNCIL GLOBAL SUMMIT

The Caribbean will be the sight of a major industry event later this year. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Global Summit will take place in Puerto Rico from April 21 to 23. The goal of the event is to raise awareness of the significant economic impact of travel and tourism. According to data provided by the organization, the travel and tourism sector supports 10% of global GDP and one out of every 11 jobs world-wide. Major speakers, networking and education are the main draws for attendees.



**Guevara Manzo**

“We are delighted to bring next year’s Global Summit to the beautiful tropical Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, a welcoming and diverse destination, which not only offers visitors glorious beaches — it is also home to the only tropical rainforest in the U.S.,” says Gloria Guevara Manzo, president & CEO of WTTC, in a written statement. “Hosting the Global Summit in Puerto Rico reflects the commitment and efforts of the government and tourist board to grow both business and leisure travel.”

**C&IT**

# LAS VEGAS

*With Major Expansions and Upgrades Underway, Las Vegas and Reno Are Ready to Dazzle Planners in 2020 and Beyond*

BY DAVID SWANSON

**W**e know Las Vegas for its showgirls and crooners, its casino life and pool scene. But the city that is already firmly positioned as one of the world's top entertainment, meeting and convention destinations is quickly adopting a new guise that promises to expand its dedicated fan base even further.

This April, the Las Vegas Strip will host the 85th annual NFL Draft, one of the most anticipated events on the sports calendar. And in September, the Raiders move to Las Vegas to play next season's home games at the new, \$1.9 billion Allegiant Stadium, now in its final stages of construction just off the Strip.

"Las Vegas is a place where you can experience sports and entertainment in a way that's totally different than anywhere else on earth," says Chris Meyer, CEM, CMP, vice president of Global Sales for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA). "We've evolved into a year-round professional sports city with the introduction of the NHL's Las Vegas Golden Knights and the WNBA's Las Vegas Aces in the past couple of years, and next fall we'll welcome the NFL's Raiders."

It's not like Las Vegas needed to add another dimension to its entertainment package. But there's no question that major league sports teams will help further diversify the city's attractions — and provide meeting and convention planners with new angles to utilize in producing dynamic and memorable events.

"Las Vegas is great because it's arguably the event and convention capital in the U.S.," suggests Samantha Kearns, CMM, owner of Kearns & Company, a San Diego-based corporate event planning company. "The city is incredibly well versed in moving mass amounts of people quickly, the number of hotel options make pricing very competitive, and food and beverage options and customizations are essentially endless."

Kearns adds: "I have yet to have a client ask for something — no matter how outlandish it seems — that can't be done in Las Vegas. From experiential events to corporate meetings, everything is doable."

## LAS VEGAS »

The Caesars properties have been Kearns' go-to when bringing corporate groups to Las Vegas for larger tech conferences such as CES or IWCE — groups of 20 to 60 that may walk the show floor or have meeting spaces on-site, but don't always have an exhibit in the show.

"Caesars has helped me pull off events and meetings that at times felt impossible," Kearns says. "The properties are always accommodating my meeting needs and last-minute alterations to guest room blocks, food and beverage, and the change of plans that sometimes happen in the 11th hour of the planning process."

Kearns says, from a planner's perspective, she particularly likes The LINQ Hotel + Experience. "The impossibly easy access to a variety of restaurants, shops, Monorail transportation, and the Strip make it an easy choice," Kearns explains. "Oftentimes my corporate groups are in a meeting room or at the convention center all day and The LINQ allows them to stroll the promenade, zip line or take a ride on the High Roller, and experience some of the fun that Las Vegas offers without having to travel far. Easy access to the Monorail is also a budget saver — I can buy passes for my sales teams and cut down on overall transportation costs so we can funnel that spend into different areas of the budget."

Kearns values being able to offer her groups concessions tailored to their interests — be it room upgrades, or offering Platinum or Diamond status to the C-suite. And, she adds, her requests never generate a hard "No" from the Caesars properties.

"They are always willing to work with my requests, no matter how large or last-minute, to make sure I'm happy with the solution," Kearns says. "Whether it's a sudden increase in meeting space for a new product launch party, an on-site revision to



The LINQ Promenade includes the High Roller observation wheel and other activities to keep attendees busy after a long day of meetings.

my A/V needs, or an addition to my guest room block, they have always made my vision come to life, and made my clients very happy. Since closed mouths don't get fed, I keep a very open dialogue going with my on-site event and catering managers so they can work in stride with me to make sure we are exceeding my client's expectations."

Adds Kearns, "The groups that I bring to The LINQ expect that we

Las Vegas is great because it's arguably the event and convention capital in the U.S.

**SAMANTHA KEARNS, CMM**  
Owner, Kearns & Company



go back again the following year. We consistently come in under budget, achieve our event and meeting objectives, and everyone leaves having had a great time socially."

Come spring, Caesars Entertainment will have even more to attract meetings and conventions with the debut of Caesars FORUM, a \$375 million conference facility located adjacent to the High Roller observation wheel. The 550,000-sf facility will provide direct access to 8,500 hotel rooms at Harrah's Las Vegas, the

LINQ and Flamingo Hotel and Casino Las Vegas, and will offer the two largest pillar-free ballrooms in the world, each 110,000 sf, plus more than 100 breakout rooms. Since announcing the project, Caesars reports that more than \$390 million in meetings and events have been signed to utilize the facility, with more than 70% of those contracts representing new business.

With 4 million sf of meeting and convention space within a 2-mile stretch on the Las Vegas Strip, MGM Resorts remains the dominant player for the meetings market. Over the last two years, 850,000 sf of meeting space has been added at ARIA Resort & Casino, MGM Grand Las Vegas Hotel & Casino, Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino Las Vegas and Park MGM Las Vegas. With its increased flexibility, the new meeting space allows for more robust and creative meeting options to meet the ever-changing needs for collaborative and productive work spaces.

Just more than a year ago, the MGM Grand expanded its conference center by 250,000 sf in a \$130 million expansion. Last year, the new Park MGM also debuted a 77,000-sf conference space with a combination of non-traditional spaces, an outdoor terrace and flexible design,

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Caesars FORUM, which has already booked nearly \$400 million in event and convention business, is expected to open in March.

filling an unmet need in Las Vegas for small groups, while also offering spaces to host up to 5,000 attendees in the Park Theater.

At the other end of the Strip, the venerable Tropicana Las Vegas — a DoubleTree by Hilton, is preparing for a soft renovation of its 100,000-sf convention center and all guest rooms, slated to begin in the first quarter of this year. The resort has already added three new F&B options during the last two years, including Robert Irvine's Public House, a partnership with the Food Network that gives the titular chef a chance to provide his spin on American pub cuisine. The 300-seat venue has a private room that accommodates up to 100 patrons, providing two options for groups to take over the space. Next door, the Red Lotus Asian Kitchen serves soups and noodle dishes with roots in the cuisine of China, Vietnam, Thailand and Korea. And last year, the Tropicana debuted the Trago Lounge, a high-end, redo of the former Tropicana Lounge, specializing in craft cocktails, bourbons and scotch whiskeys.

Last summer, the main tower pool deck at the The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino was redesigned, creating a Mediterranean oasis in the city. Taking design cues from the Italian Riviera, with sculptural art pieces and quaint gardens — the five pools provide the look and feel of a European escape. The addition of 10, well-appointed premium poolside cabanas provide over-the-top amenities, some of which feature private plunge pools — reflecting the needs of the resort's most discerning guests.

The Venetian was home to the annual user's conference for San Francisco-based software company Splunk Inc. The conference drew 11,000 Splunk Enthusiasts for 400 education sessions held at the Vene-

tian and adjacent Sands Expo & Convention Center. Leslie Hasvold, Splunk's director of Corporate Event Marketing, says the conference will be returning to the Venetian this year. "Our customers' and partners' experience across the Venetian and the Sands is seamless, providing them with the right space and journey for a conference of our size," Hasvold says. "For planners, the teams at the properties are great partners, and the suite room concept at the hotels is a huge plus."

For planners, the teams at the properties are great partners, and the suite room concept at the hotels is a huge plus.

**LESLIE HASVOLD**  
Director of Corporate Event Marketing  
Splunk Inc.



Hasvold was impressed with how The Venetian handled one particular aspect of Splunk's list of priorities.

"As a company and a conference, we take our diversity and inclusion efforts very seriously," Hasvold says. "The Venetian jumped in with both feet and supported our efforts in creating gender-neutral restrooms, a multifaith room complete with a qibla, mothers' rooms, and a wellness and relaxation space."

The Venetian and Palazzo resort complex includes more than 7,000

rooms, with 2.25 million sf of meeting space spread between the hotels and the adjacent Sands, allowing the integrated property to cater events of almost any size under one roof. This is helpful, as keeping attentions focused can be a struggle in a glittery location such as Las Vegas.

"One challenge of the city as a whole is the sheer quantity of distractions our attendees face," Hasvold says. "It is especially important in Las Vegas to make sure our content and activities are compelling enough to hold our attendees' interest." The city's ability to handle large groups with ease tops the list of advantages for meeting planners like Hasvold. "Beyond that, the large meeting and convention hotels, the reasonable sleeping room pricing, the airlift, and the city's constant improvements for planners and travelers" all help make Las Vegas a good fit for Splunk.

Stephanie Hannah agrees. The vice president of Field Marketing for Irvine, California-based IT company Trace3 says: "Las Vegas has been the perfect destination for the Evolve Leadership and Technology Conference for 10 years. Whether it's a hotel, a dining experience or entertainment, the advantage of working with this city is that there are so many great options to choose from. The entertainment and dining is unparalleled. I produce an award event, and

work with Fernando Quevado and Kelly Hamilton from Q Productions to help me produce an Oscar-worthy show every year. Kelly also does a laser show that opens my events — it is incredible. And, a dining event that we have repeated several times is the Lip-Smacking Foodie Tour. My guests get to embark on a five-star dining experience around Las Vegas and end the evening with Champagne and a helicopter ride down the Las Vegas Strip."

The Evolve conference draws 1,500 attendees to the city annually, and the event is scheduled again in June at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas, now part of Marriott's Autograph Collection. The 3,042-room hotel occupies a prime location near the center of the Strip, and features more than 240,000 sf of meeting space.

"I chose the Cosmopolitan Hotel because the location is great, the meeting space fits all my needs, and the food choices are the highest quality," Hannah says. "The hotel itself is modern, and continuously updated, and the room product is one of the best — it has just been refreshed and the rooms look fantastic."

Hannah also lauds the hotel's staff. "The sales manager was great to work with during the contracting process," she adds.

One of the Cosmopolitan's unique venues is The Chelsea, a working, transformable theater inspired by an abandoned glass factory. The 40,000-sf concert hall, split over two levels, offers an avant-garde approach to meetings and entertainment, with cast glass chandeliers, a vintage lobby bar, private VIP opera boxes, and a decorative grand staircase.

"The Chelsea has amazing sound and visuals," Hannah says. But, she cautions: "It's extremely costly — make sure you negotiate a set load-in and load-out and daily usage fee."

One option for trimming distractions is moving to a hotel off the Strip. Although the M Resort Spa Casino is on Las Vegas Boulevard, it's also about 9 miles south of the airport, well away from the usual bustle and traffic of the Strip.

Debbie Welder, GLP, GTP, global corporate travel manager for Rimini Street, says M Resort was a great fit for her company, a third-party software support company, in part due to Rimini Street being based in Las Vegas. "But, we find that our employees enjoy after-hours leisure activities as well as dining options," she says. "The hotel is only 15 minutes from the airport, so it is easily accessible, and we don't deal with most of the traffic around the Strip."

It is also still relatively accessible to most of the off-site activities Las Vegas visitors count on. For a 90-person, new-hire training event in the summer, Rimini Street held one off-site event at Topgolf Las Vegas.

"It is the No. 1 request from our staff and always highly rated on surveys," Welder says. "Topgolf is for players of all skill levels, and offers an all-inclusive package which makes planning easy. We're holding another large event in February, and



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## LAS VEGAS »

will be offering Hoover Dam Tours, exotic car rides, a Cirque show, Top-golf and the Mob Museum.”

M Resort is one example of how planners may be able to tap into the city's growing sports focus. The hotel sits in close proximity to the Raiders practice facility, which is expected to yield opportunities for corporate planners and casino players alike. Starting in the summer, M Resort will be designated the 'Official Raiders Team Headquarters Hotel,' and exclusive access to experiences with the Raiders organization are in the works. An official Raiders Bar & Grill will open at M Resort this summer, complimenting the hotel's popular 16 Rooftop Bar, which opened last year.

The 390-room M Resort offers more than 92,000 sf of meeting space, including a 25,000-sf pavilion, grand ballroom, outdoor terraces and multiple reception areas.

“The resort has any size meeting room you could need, from the large pavilion to the board room,” Welder says. “They also have solid relationships with third-party vendors if extra décor or entertainment is needed. Rimini Street likes to brand heavily at events and the M Resort had great suggestions as well as an on-site vendor who could assist with printing and installation.”

Welder found the resort's catering staff to be quite flexible, and the food outstanding. “We are putting together an 'Around the World' dinner for our global employees, and the catering staff has been instrumental in presenting menus that incorporate dishes from our office locations.”

Welder adds, “The meetings and events staff is extremely helpful, professional and flexible, as well. We have many changes to our meetings, and the hotel responded quickly. Nothing is off limits — public spaces can be closed off, custom menus or



Starting next summer, M Resort will be designated as the 'Official Raiders Team Headquarters Hotel,' and exclusive access to experiences with the Raiders organization are in the works.

drinks can be created, and unusual event set up is possible. All you have to do is ask, and the hotel staff can give you great advice on how other companies have used the space.”

Formerly the SLS Las Vegas, the new SAHARA Las Vegas officially took on its original name last year, and is undergoing a \$150 million refreshing. It spreads its 1,600 guest rooms among the Blanca Tower, Marra Tower, or AAA Four Diamond Alexandria Tower, each offering a distinct

SAHARA offers more than 80,000 sf of indoor-outdoor event space, including a 9,000-sf ballroom, and 30,000 sf of dedicated meeting space. There are also two pools; the Amina Spa, with 10 treatment rooms; and a 1,600-sf Fitness Studio open around the clock.

For planners and attendees seeking more than gaming and nightlife, Wynn Las Vegas recently resurrected the Wynn Golf Club and its new Tom Fazio golf course. The 18-hole championship course includes reimagined topography throughout.

“Tom Fazio has outdone himself designing a beautiful and unique new course that is even better than the one before,” says Marilyn Spiegel, president of Wynn Las Vegas and Encore. “We look forward to welcoming players back with a world-class golf experience that captures both the luxury of our resort and the excitement of Las Vegas.”

The course sits on 129 acres of the resort's private backyard, with eight all-new holes and 10 revamped holes. Completing the experience is a professional caddie program staffed with several PGA members, a new on-course culinary program, lithium-powered golf carts, expansive pro shop, and luxury clubhouse.

As for the resort, Wynn and Encore Las Vegas consist of two hotel

Whether it's a hotel, a dining experience or entertainment, the advantage of working with this city is that there are so many great options to choose from.



**STEPHANIE HANNAH**

Vice President of Field Marketing, Trace3

attendee experience. For foodies, SAHARA has a variety of restaurants sure to satiate any appetite, including the award-winning Bazaar Meat by José Andrés, which has a room to accommodate groups of 12 or more for private dining; Beers and Bets; Northside Café & Chinese Kitchen; Uno Más Street Tacos + Spirits; and Bella Bistro. Bars include Paradise Lounge and CASBAR Lounge, which offers live entertainment Thursday through Saturday from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.

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towers with a total of 4,748 guest rooms, suites and villas. It offers about 192,000 sf of casino space, 22 signature dining experiences, 11 bars, two award-winning spas, about 290,000 sf of meeting and convention space, about 160,000 sf of retail space as well as two theaters, two nightclubs, a beach club and recreation and leisure facilities.

Wynn Las Vegas has also embraced the environmental movement, last year the resort opened the Wynn Solar Field, which offsets up to 75% of the resort's peak energy needs. The solar facility will eventually be used to power the resort's new meetings and conventions space expansion, set to open in the spring, with 100% renewable energy.

### RENO AS AN ALTERNATIVE CHOICE

A popular Reno destination, Peppermill Resort Spa Casino recently renovated the guest rooms and lobbies of Peppermill North and West wings; the Florence and Pisa hospitality suites; there is now a new, private dining room that can accommodate up to 50 guests at Café Milano; and the two-story, 17th-floor suites were redone to include luxurious amenities, custom décor and exceptional views.

The resort, which sprawls over 45 acres, offers 82,000 sf of gaming action, 106,000 sf of meeting and entertainment space, which features its newly renovated Sorrento, Naples and Capri ballrooms. In addition to offering one of Nevada's largest clear-span meeting spaces, Peppermill also boasts a two-story executive boardroom, two resort pools, 10 award-winning restaurants, 15 themed bars and lounges, the world-class, 33,000-sf Spa Toscana and a fitness center.

The 1,900-room Grand Sierra Resort and Casino is Reno's largest property, with 200,000 sf of meeting space. The resort's Grand Theatre can hold up to 4,000 attendees. It also offers 45 breakout rooms for smaller groups, but can handle groups ranging from 10 to 4,000 people.

Grand Sierra also offers 11 food-and-beverage options, from a fine-dining steakhouse to casual eateries, including a Round Table Pizza Italian restaurant that features gourmet pizzas.

A self-contained Nevada Conference & Exhibition Center features 44,115 sf of meeting and exhibit space, including 12 breakout rooms. The resort complex also features a state-of-the-art spa, as well as a bowling complex, a cinema, indoor golf and a driving range.

For Elemental LED Inc., an engineering and technology company that produces linear lighting, Reno offered the solution for monthly training events for groups of 30 to 50 dealers representing Elemental

The Las Vegas Convention Center, top; the Garden of the Gods Pool Oasis at Caesars Palace Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, middle; the new SAHARA Las Vegas, bottom.

Some of Las Vegas' iconic resorts include Wynn Las Vegas, top; Tropicana Las Vegas — a DoubleTree by Hilton, middle; and ARIA Resort & Casino, bottom.



products. The Reno-based company holds the two-day events at the 824-room Atlantis Casino Resort Spa.

"The service provided by the Atlantis matches that of Elemental LED's mission statement: 'Make it easy for customers to do business with us,'" says James Chau, senior technical training manager. "The Atlantis is classic Reno in physical form. The appeal is fun and cheesy, and modern enough for comfort."

Adds Chau: "The Atlantis gave us a full coordination team which made communications really simple and direct — no need to send to a generic inbox for answers. There's one person for initial contact, one for coordination, and one for billing. In addition, the SMERF sales manager has introduced additional items to make the stay for our guests more personal, such as a welcome letter upon checking in, and gift baskets or goodies waiting in each of their hotel rooms — small gestures, big impact. The sales manager continued to provide constant communication when details, forms, or other items are missing. All of this is ingrained with her team. Not once were these team members unavailable to be contacted if anything went wrong or if additional assistance was needed."

When it comes to rooms, Chau advises being specific in communicating requests to your coordinator. "They will absolutely be accommodating in every way possible. For example, I had one guest who was afraid of elevators and required a room that was on a floor accessible by stairs. With less than one day notice they were able to handle it quickly." Chau adds that the entire Atlantis facility is always clean throughout, and he lauds the hotel's spa. "Hands down, it's the best massage you'll find in Reno. Many of my guests rave about it during a survey recap following each of the events."

Although Chau says Reno is a very active town, he cites its "limited cultural expanse" as a shortcoming for the city. "Though slowly growing, there is little to offer for those of other ethnic decent," Chau says. "What is currently present is non-authentic and mostly used as a tourist gimmick. This becomes a challenge when we host our international VIPs who are craving a bit of home during long stints."

While Nevada's second-largest city may not have quite the flash of the Las Vegas Strip, the destination still provides unexpected activities like tackling the world's tallest outdoor rock-climbing wall at Whitney Peak Hotel or a beer tasting at Great Basin Brewing Co., the oldest brewery in Nevada.

"Reno is full of events every day," Chau adds. "Contacting local coordinators early will give you the best bang for your dollar, but also grant you and your guests the best experience possible. No hiccups, no incidents — just pure comfort." **C&IT**

TEXAS »



Dallas offers more than 80,000 hotel rooms, 13,000 of which are in downtown.

# TEXAS

The 'Lone Star State' Offers Everything

BY MAURA KELLER

**T**exas is a spectacular destination for corporate events, conferences and meetings. With its one-of-a-kind indoor and outdoor venues, state-of-the-art convention centers, and an array of hotels from which to choose, Texas offers meeting and event planners — and attendees — unique, memorable and impactful experiences.

**DESTINATION DALLAS**

For Suzanne Swanson, CMP, CMM, meeting manager of Events at AVID Center in San Diego, California, Dallas offers a wealth of options for the summer institute that AVID hosts each year. In fact, for the last

12 years, AVID has orchestrated at least one summer institute in downtown Dallas each summer.

“We have used the Hyatt Regency Dallas, Omni Dallas Hotel and Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center. We also use the Hilton Anatole for our National Conference,” Swanson says.

At each AVID institute, about 5,000 adult educators, including teachers, principals and administrators, attend the three-day institute to learn strategies that they can take back to their schools in the fall.

“We have a general session on Day 2 to feature a couple of AVID students and one AVID teacher who share their experiences with AVID

and how it has impacted their lives and communities,” Swanson says. “We usually have two general sessions at the Hyatt Regency’s Landmark Ballroom, which is beautiful.”

One of the key reasons Dallas is a popular venue for AVID is because it is centrally located in the U.S. and is convenient for larger Dallas school districts.

“We have very responsive hotel and convention center partners that know our event, so it is a true partnership,” Swanson says. “We are tax-exempt in Texas, which saves us money. And one of the biggest draws is the amount of available meeting space in close proximity to the convention center. We need 85 to 90



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## TEXAS »

meeting rooms concurrently over a three-day period.”

Named one of the Trade Show Executive magazine’s Top 10 convention centers, the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center Dallas (KBHCCD) is one of the largest convention centers in the nation and connects to the 1,001-room Omni Dallas Hotel via an expansive sky bridge. Omni Dallas Hotel offers 142,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting and event space, eight restaurants, a full-service Mokara Spa, and a heated infinity swimming pool and terrace.

With over 1 million sf of exhibit space, the KBHCCD offers three large ballrooms and a 221,290-sf arena with 9,816 seats. In addition, Dallas offers more than 80,000 hotel rooms, 13,000 of which are in downtown Dallas. Also, 12 newly opened hotels offer even more options for attendees.

“Our institutes run until 5 p.m. each day, so many of our attendees visit restaurants located downtown and uptown,” Swanson says. In the past, some attendees have visited AT&T Stadium, home of the Dallas Cowboys, while others have visited the downtown art museum and attended live performances. In fact, Dallas boasts the largest urban arts district in the nation, spanning 19 square blocks. What’s more, the city’s expansive amount of green spaces and walkable neighborhoods offer a myriad of entertainment options, as do the city’s six professional sports teams, 200 golf courses, and more than 12,000 restaurants.

“We’ve been hosting events in Dallas for at least 12 years and our partners make us feel special. It is fairly central in the U.S. with two easily accessible airports,” Swanson says. “If your attendees are local, the DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) is an affordable way to get downtown.”



In addition to the world’s only twice-daily cattle drive, Fort Worth offers the 35-block Sundance Square shopping and entertainment complex.

In North Dallas sits the Renaissance Dallas Addison Hotel, which offers 101,117 sf of event space. That includes the 25,520-sf Crystal Ballroom, which can accommodate 3,000 attendees theater-style. Looking for a little shopping or to visit a museum? Less than a mile away are the Galleria Dallas and the Cavanaugh Flight Museum.

### DESTINATION FORT WORTH

Chelsey Berend, vice president of Field Experience at Kynect in Dallas, recently planned Kynect’s annual convention, Kynecton, where the company recognizes their sales

“The downtown Fort Worth location is safe, walkable and has many restaurants and shops to entertain our attendees.”

**CHELSEY BEREND**  
Vice President of Field Experience  
Kynect



channel with awards, dinners, parties and training. Held at the Fort Worth Convention Center, more than 4,000 attended.

“Kynecton is Kynect’s premier annual, multiday event bringing thousands of independent associates and their guest from across the country to Texas for an unforgettable experi-

ence, full of training, networking, recognition, entertainment and world-renowned speakers,” Berend says.

While Fort Worth is close to Kynect’s corporate location of Dallas, the venue location also was in an optimal city with the right event space availability for the organization’s agenda.

“The downtown Fort Worth location is safe, walkable and has many restaurants and shops to entertain our attendees,” Berend says. “They explored Sundance Square and Cow Town. Fort Worth is a perfect location for meetings and events because it is laid out to accommodate foot traffic and is easily accessible by the DFW Metroplex, as well as, close to DFW Airport. The city has friendly people, its clean and safe and also has lots of culture to offer.”

In addition to its walkable downtown, Fort Worth is truly an urban oasis home to several entertainment districts, including the world’s only twice-daily cattle drive. According to the Fort Worth CVB, the growth of Fort Worth’s downtown area, which includes the 35-block Sundance Square shopping and entertainment center, has helped boost the demand for meetings and conventions. The recently completed Dickies Arena, located in the city’s cultural district amid the Will Rogers Memorial Cen-



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**TEXAS »**

ter Campus, offers entertainment options including sporting events, concerts and various family events. In addition, with 91,315 sf of meeting space, Dickies Arena accommodates conventions, exhibit events, business meetings and private events.

“The Fort Worth CVB is also extremely helpful, and they are very engaged in the meetings and events industry,” Berend says. “They come with knowledge of partners in the area, and also offer assistance with meeting and event planning. They make you feel like family and make sure that all groups are taken care of in their city that they are so proud of.”

**DESTINATION SAN ANTONIO**

Boasting more than 14,000 downtown hotel rooms and the Henry B. González Convention Center, San Antonio has proven to be a wonderful option for meetings and events.

Thanks in part to the delightful San Antonio River Walk, meeting attendees have easy access to dozens of hotels as well as the 1.6 million-sf convention center, which has recently undergone a \$325 million transformation.

Stuart Ruff-Lyon, CMP, DES, vice president of Events and Exhibitions at RIMS, recently organized a RIMS Annual Conference & Exhibition at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center. “We attracted some 10,000 delegates from 70 countries,” Ruff-Lyon says. “The center itself is beautifully done in a modern, stylish manner that is pleasing to attendees.”

The RIMS attendees enjoyed visiting the Alamo, but really were impressed with the Riverwalk. They were able to visit shopping, dining and nightlife — all within a five-minute walk from the convention center.

“My advice to meeting planners



© RIMS

**San Antonio, and the Henry B. González Convention Center, provided the perfect destination and venue for 10,000 delegates at one event.**

considering San Antonio for a meeting or event is to partner with Visit San Antonio as much as possible. “The CVB provided a wonderful experience to help us make full use of the destination,” Ruff-Lyon says. The RIMS conference enjoyed hundreds of off-site events and parties, including the opening party at the historic Sunset Station.

“It remains our best opening party to date,” Ruff-Lyon says. “The city is full of skilled, professional event partners ready to assist you in

My advice to meeting planners considering San Antonio for a meeting or event is to partner with Visit San Antonio as much as possible.



**STUART RUFF-LYON, CMP, DES**  
Vice President of Events and Exhibitions  
RIMS

your planning experience. We would not have been successful without the support of the community and all of our event partners, particularly our DMC, Hosts Global Alliance.”

**DESTINATION PLANO**

Designated the ‘least stressed city in Texas,’ Plano provides a unique hospitality all its own. From state-of-the-art meeting spaces to a wealth of hotel options, Plano hosts every type of event — from small, intimate meetings and soirées to major conventions, trade shows and conferences.

Just 20 minutes north of Dallas, Plano is easily accessible on the DART light rail line, allowing attendees to travel throughout the region and explore.

Known for its plethora of walking districts and neighborhoods, Plano boasts the Shops at Legacy, which is within walking distance of more than 100 restaurants and various shops and its anchor hotel, Dallas/Plano Marriott at Legacy Town Center. Nearby, Legacy West offers an additional mixed-use, 225-acre development teeming with shops, restaurants and the Renaissance Dallas at Plano Legacy West Hotel. In addition, the new 30,000-sf Boardwalk features various eateries and a local brewery. A short drive from the Plano Event Center, attendees can also explore the Downtown Plano arts district, offering additional retail and entertainment options.

**DESTINATION AUSTIN**

Each year, more than 2,300 people attend Orangetheory Fitness’ annual convention in Austin. Jennifer Tate, director of corporate events for Orangetheory Fitness, says the purpose of the event is to bring together the Orangetheory Fitness network from across the globe to celebrate the company’s successes and highlight the organization’s innovation ideas for the future.



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## TEXAS »

“Our attendees hear expert advice, learn proven strategies, network with like-minded people and get inspired with their peers,” Tate says. The event was held at the Austin Convention Center (ACC), Fairmont Austin, Hilton Austin and The Long Center.

“We chose Austin because it met all of our needs – enough sleeping rooms, enough meeting space, ease of travel, lots to offer our attendees in restaurants and nightlife options all in an exciting environment,” Tate says. “Austin is a great city for a young audience who like to have fun and explore the area. Take the time to explore all the city has to offer as it surely has something for everyone.”

Indeed, as the state capital of Texas, Austin is filled with exciting venues and eclectic hot spots. While known as a popular leisure locale, Austin also offers wonderful options for meetings and events of all sizes. The ACC is a state-of-the-art facility that boasts a wealth of in-house technology capabilities that will help deliver an event that keeps attendees coming back for more. Located in close proximity to the convention center are 11,000 hotel rooms and shops, restaurants and entertainment venues aplenty. The greater Austin area features more than 39,000 hotel rooms.

Omni Barton Creek Resort & Spa offers 493 of those guest rooms and suites at its 4,000-acre property, which includes four championship golf courses from which golf-loving attendees can select: Fazio Canyons, Fazio Foothills, Coore Crenshaw and Palmer Lakeside.

The resort also offers four pools, including an indoor pool available

year-round; 76,192 sf of meeting and event space; a new, 13,000-sf Mokara Spa with an exclusive pool and rooftop deck; and a 3,000-sf fitness center. As for dining, the resort offers seven signature restaurants, including Blind Salamander Kitchen & Bar and Bob’s Steak & Chop House.

In addition to a wealth of traditional meeting venues, Austin also offers many eclectic, unique venue options for meetings and events, including favorite Texas barbecue hot



Orangetheory Fitness picked Austin for its annual convention because of the destination’s ample sleeping rooms, meeting space and more.

spots, racetracks, stages, a draft house or even lakeside. The city is also home to more than 250 live music venues – adding to its appeal as a popular hot spot for attendees of all ages.

### DESTINATION IRVING

Home to more than 12,000 hotel rooms, Irving is the ideal destination thanks to its proximity to downtown Dallas. One of the city’s ideal locales for meetings and events is the Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas (ICCLC). With more than 275,000 sf, the ICCLC offers elegant ballrooms, a leading-edge exhibit hall, several breakout rooms and a vast amount of pre-function space. Beyond the confines of the convention center, Irving offers an additional 200,000 sf of meeting and event space.

Of course, the convention center’s centralized location means that attendees revel in the area’s

mixed-use entertainment district, including the Toyota Music Factory, with its indoor-outdoor amphitheater and 50,000-sf plaza with stage. The area also boasts a vast amount of entertainment, retail and restaurant spaces, including a movie theater and comedy club.

Recently the \$110 million Westin Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas hotel opened and offers 350 guest rooms, the 10,000-sf Harmony Ballroom, and 30,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting and event space.

### DESTINATION HOUSTON

When Joe Martin, executive director of THSCA was planning his organization’s convention, the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRBCC) in Houston was the ideal locale for 13,714 attendees, the majority of whom were coaches, with the remainder being exhibitors. This ‘Coaching School’ is an annual event providing professional development, networking and buying opportunities for coaches.

“Houston First has been a tremendous partner and the GRBCC campus is a fabulous facility where our coaches have the opportunity to bring family, park their car and walk to our convention as well as to entertainment and restaurant venues,” Martin says. “The GRBCC campus allows for adequate entertainment and food options.” With more than 1.2 million sf of exhibit, meeting and registration space, including 639,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space and 88 meeting rooms, Houston’s convention center is a haven for events of all sizes. Of course, the convention center is just one venue that can house conventions as the city of Houston boasts more than 4.4 million sf of convention facilities. Another favorite convention facility is the NRG Park, formerly Reliant Park, which includes 2.1 million sf of exhibit and meeting space.

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## TEXAS »

In addition, the Houston area has more than 80,000 hotel rooms with approximately 8,000 in the downtown area.

Martin believes pitching the idea of parking your vehicle and having the ability to walk to all venues is huge. “The Marriott Marquis Houston is a great venue for families in the warm months due to the pool and multiple restaurants,” Martin says. “Don’t let the size of the city concern you — once you arrive onto this campus it seems like a small city.”

For those eager to venture around the region, downtown Houston is sure to please. Downtown Houston features a thriving professional arts scene and an expansive museum district featuring 18 venues located in close proximity to each other. Houston’s Memorial Park is home to a public golf course, trails and tennis courts.

**DESTINATION EL PASO**

If hosting a meeting off the beaten path sounds more appealing, El Paso offers the idyllic Texan experience for meeting planners and attendees alike. Teeming with history, attendees offer a unique historical and cultural experience all its own. A recent multi-million-dollar investment has revitalized downtown El Paso to include a multipurpose performing arts venue, Hispanic cultural center, and public art projects — all within walking distance to the El Paso Convention Center.

**DESTINATION ARLINGTON**

The Arlington City Council voted recently to approve a \$550 million addition to the city’s Entertainment District that will include a new hotel, a publicly owned convention center and a parking facility. Construction is expected to begin early this year, with completion slated for 2023.



Grapevine has a variety of venues — such as the Palace Arts Center — that can accommodate conventions and events whether large or small.

The hotel will have 888 guest rooms, and it will be called the Loews Arlington. All told, the project will result in 150,000 sf of indoor convention space, 66,000 sf of outdoor space and a future expo hall that will connect via a skybridge to the new 300-room Live! by Loews Hotel and its convention space, resulting in a roughly 1,200-room hotel. A public-private partnership between Loews, the Texas Rangers, Cordish Cos., the City of Arlington and Tarrant County is funding the project.

tions as the Dallas Cowboy’s AT&T Stadium, the new Texas Rangers Globe Life Field, the \$250 million Texas Live! entertainment complex, Six Flags Over Texas and Six Flags Hurricane Harbor. The \$150 million flagship Live! by Loews Arlington luxury hotel opened in August, offering guests walkable access to the Entertainment District’s offerings. Arlington was also recently selected as the future home of the National Medal of Honor Museum, which will also be in the Entertainment District.

Don’t let the size of the city concern you — once you arrive onto this campus it seems like a small city.

**JOE MARTIN**  
Executive Director  
THSCA



There are also plans to develop the southwest corner of Globe Life Park stadium into 200,000 sf of office space, including 280 residential units along with 100,000 sf of restaurant, retail, parking and small business incubator space on the southeast corner of the intersection. Development of this project will move forward once a tenant is in place, officials said.

The Arlington Entertainment District contains such tourism attrac-

**DESTINATION GRAPEVINE**

Another Texas option teeming with charm and character is Grapevine. Located in the Northern part of the state, Grapevine is home to more than 20 hotels, 11,000 area hotel rooms and 1 million sf of meeting space — all within minutes of the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. From the Grapevine Convention Center to the Palace Arts Center to the Grapevine Concourse Event Center, the variety of meeting and event spaces in Grapevine is celebrated by meeting planners from across the U.S. When work is complete for the day, event attendees can enjoy a visit to the Sea Life Aquarium or embark on the historic Grapevine Vintage Railroad or tour many of the area’s winery tasting rooms. **C&IT**

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BY SARA  
CHURCHVILLE

**F**or planners and attendees alike, Florida is a glittering jewel with delightful destinations and amazing amusements. With numerous options for activities from sunny beaches to natural wonders to tantalizing theme parks, it's no wonder the 'Sunshine State' remains a top spot for hosting any type of event.

### ORLANDO IS A POPULAR CHOICE

No discussion of Orlando is complete without mentioning the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC). It offers more than 7 million sf of meeting and exhibition space, making it the second-largest convention center in the U.S. A \$605 million expansion includes work on the Convention Way Grand Concourse and the Multipurpose Venue. When the work is complete, the South Building will have 675,141 sf of exhibit space and a grand total of 1.15 million sf of space. The Convention Way Grand Concourse expansion includes an additional 60,000 sf of meeting space and an 80,000-sf ballroom. The expansion, expected to wrap up in late 2023, will bring total exhibit space at the OCCC to 2.3 million sf.

While the OCCC has its appeal, for Angela C. York, senior manager of events and special projects for law firm Thompson Coburn LLP, the Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate was the ideal venue.

"We wanted somewhere with great value, abundant meeting and evening event spaces, and warm enough for outside activities," York says. She understood that in late fall, only a few places can fit the bill. She plans a retreat for partners every few years and chose Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate "because of the championship golf courses, layout and location of the meeting space, and their amazing spa." For four days last fall, some 230 partners, chiefs and departmental directors descended on this Orlando resort for a series of programs, activities and events.

Rather than convening all the partners each morning, York offered them breakfast vouchers, coordinated by the hotel's conference services manager. "They were

# FLORIDA

*The 'Sunshine State' Has  
Something to Satisfy Planners*



Clockwise from top left:  
Mickey Mouse at Amway  
Center, The Wheel at ICON  
Park Orlando, a beach in the  
South Walton area.

## FLORIDA »

able to have breakfast when and where they wanted, and it was billed back to our master bill. The best part was that they could either enjoy the full buffet at Trevi's or simply grab and go from Morsel's." Lunches were catered and held at the spa, the golf course or in a hospitality suite.

"Each evening event was kept on property, which is not normally the case for this program — indeed, some of the partners initially expressed disappointment that they would stay on property each night. A lot of planning and details went into each dinner, York says, crediting once again the conference services manager with creating "three amazing, yet very different evening events. She made the planning unbelievably easy. She is extraordinarily creative and has a vision like no other." By the end of the program, York says, she knew she had a success on her hands — everyone was pleased with the decision to hold evening activities on-site. "Some of the comments and feedback that we received: 'the food on Saturday night was simply amazing,' 'The options at dinner last night were incredible,' 'The presentation at each food station was over the top' and my favorite was 'This was the best retreat ever!'"

The attendees were also thrilled with the planned activities: golf tournaments, a tennis match, spa treatments, reserved cabanas at the pool, helicopter tours and eco-fishing tours, all available at or departing directly from the resort. "There are so many incredibly different meeting and event spaces that over multiple days, many in our group didn't even see half of the property. We were able to create three totally different evening events that were unbelievably memorable experiences for our attendees," York says.

Since her visit, many changes are



Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate offers 248,111 sf of meeting and event space, eight dining outlets and transportation to theme parks.

afoot. Planned for this year are: New carpeting, woodwork, furniture and artwork in the lobby, and meeting rooms, as well as decor, furniture and fixtures upgrades to all guest rooms. David's Club, the sports bar and steakhouse, whose four signature steaks feature 30-day, wet-aged prime Angus beef, will get new wall coverings, carpets, refinished wood flooring, new leather seating, new tables, and new flat-screen TVs.

Attendees who stay at the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin

meeting and convention theme park tickets. The beauty of the set-up is clear: it's practically impossible to know when one has actually left the property at all. For example, attendees can head to the latest themed dining space at Epcot, Space 220, which when open will mimic the physical sensation of dining on the space station. While space food has come a long way from those early freeze-dried, Meals-Ready-to-Eat, the menu at this restaurant will veer more toward contemporary American.

Without ever leaving the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort, groups have at their disposal more than 333,000 sf of meeting space as well as the Mandara Spa and 18 restaurants and lounges. Last year, the Swan debuted sandwiches-and-coffee venue, Java, and Chill, the alcoholic and non-alcoholic frozen drink counter.

At the Dolphin, a new 1,600-sf meeting room called The Caribbean Room is geared toward breakouts and small meetings. Shula's Steak House got a complete refresh of the space and menu: An expanded bar and lounge featuring a three-sided, wraparound bar, as well as new menu items, such as a 22-ounce dry aged, rib-eye steak. A new 14 story tower, The Cove at the Walt Disney World Swan Resort, should be

We were able to create three totally different evening events that were unbelievably memorable experiences for our attendees.



**ANGELA C. YORK**  
Senior Manager of Events and Special Projects  
Thompson Coburn LLP

Resort have access to the Disney World theme parks, two of which are within walking distance, as well as complimentary transportation throughout the Disney resort, extra hours at the theme parks, and priority golf reservations. At the same time, they need never encounter a single Disney character if that's their preference. Planners can take advantage of the Disney meeting and event production team, and make use of

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## FLORIDA »

ready next year. It will have more than 22,000 sf of meeting space, 349 guest rooms, a 16,800-sf elevated deck with pool, a 90-seat restaurant and a rooftop reception space with views of the nightly Walt Disney World fireworks.

Rosen Shingle Creek, a 255-acre Orlando resort, recently spruced up its rooms and 524,000 sf of meeting space to add more lively colors and patterns to the decor and carpeting. Event space includes three presidential suites and 30 hospitality suites. The resort property also puts at attendees' disposal a 13,000-sf spa, an 18-hole golf course with three new holes and a few redesigned ones, along with a 2,000-sf golf pavilion offering lunch space for groups, four outdoor swimming pools, two lighted tennis courts, a basketball court, a sand volleyball court, a nature trail, a video arcade and charging stations for electric vehicles.

In an illustration of the many possibilities of the Rosen Shingle Creek resort, a year ago, some 5,000 people attended the Dentsply Sirona World convention, held over the course of three days. Continuing education seminars, the latest news in innovative dental supplies, more than 100 breakout sessions and a keynote address by author Doris Kearns Goodwin were on the docket, and many non-dentists were among the



Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort offers 333,000 sf of meeting and event space.

attendees treated to a private concert from Katy Perry and a comedy show from Jim Gaffigan. Activities included a Fun Run along the golf course, with attendees dressing in medieval costumes and then — running in those costumes. Later, perhaps these same costume-loving attendees donned lederhosen for an Oktoberfest hoedown complete with a Bavarian band. Free transportation was available daily to and from Universal Orlando Resort and to SeaWorld Orlando and Aquatica, had attendees chosen to use it.

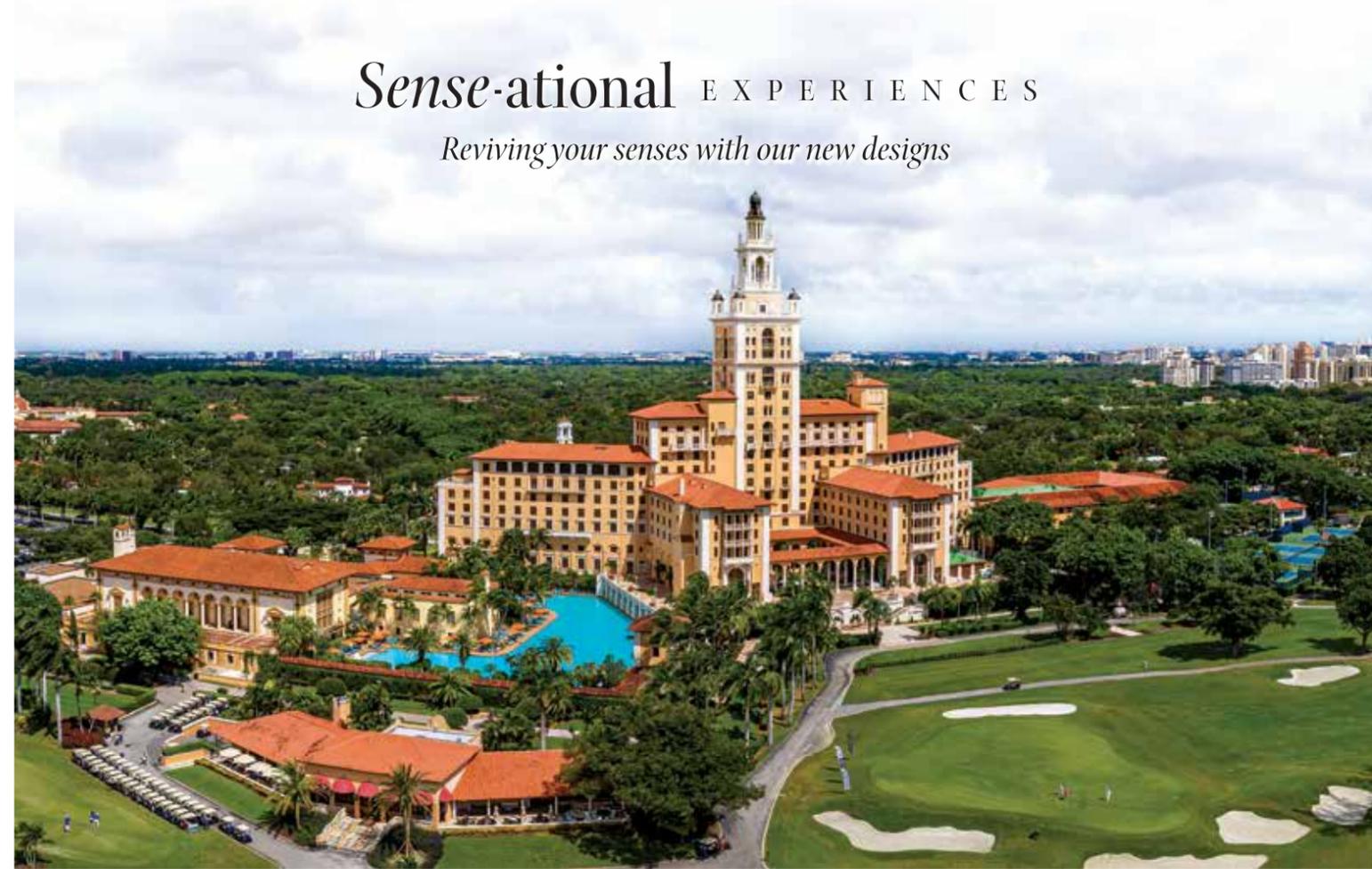
## MIAMI FLOURISHES

Lyana Blokhina, CEO of event planning company LBright Events, knew she wanted to bring her group of 20 top executives from a Florida-based corporate technology company to Miami. The group planned to do product testing for two days — and to test out beach chairs. What she didn't know was where exactly to bring them. "Miami is a

great meetings destination, with great weather year-round and many options to choose from for hotels, restaurants and team-building activities. The Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau is always very helpful in assisting meeting planners with their sourcing," she says. At their suggestion, she tried the Palms Hotel & Spa resort for the first time and says she was "very pleased with the result. They offered a very competitive rate, and the sales manager was very easy to communicate with." The site inspection was the deal clincher for her.

"Most attendees flew in from the East Coast and truly appreciated warm weather," Blokhina says. "Friendly staff at the hotel made a great first impression, followed by a delicious dinner served in the outdoor tiki hut." Apart from The Tiki Bar, another place to eat on the property is Essensia Restaurant, which offers a seasonal three-course prix-fixe menu and prides itself on serving sustainably sourced and locally grown food: Line Caught Swordfish, Sustainable Caribbean Snapper and Foraged Mushroom

The South Walton area along Florida's northern Gulf of Mexico coast consists of 16 beach neighborhoods, each with its own distinct character.



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Risotto, for example, are three menu offerings. “I would strongly recommend the property for a meeting or an incentive group,” Blokhina says. “The hotel has a lot of different options for various programs. It has a great location right on the beach, yet it’s easily accessible to shopping, the airport and activities available in Miami.”

The attendees particularly enjoyed the beach and the pool, as well as “great meeting space, light and comfortable rooms and great F&B,” she says. “All the food and beverage functions were held at the hotel, including reception and welcome dinner. It was very easy to plan and offered a variety of outlets.”

A Miami mainstay since its opening in 1926, The Miami Biltmore Hotel and Resort is an elegant venue that also happens to be designated a National Historic Landmark. The 271-room resort, which sits on more than 150 acres, includes 174 suites and features iconic, Mediterranean architecture.

It offers a restored Donald Ross 18-hole, par-71 championship golf course, tennis courts, a European Spa, modern fitness center, and claims to have the largest hotel pool on the U.S. East Coast.

The Miami Biltmore also boasts 75,000 sf of function space, which includes the crown jewel of the property’s event space, the Conference Center of the Americas (CCA). The CCA, which is in a separate building on the grounds, offers 40,000 sf of function space, eight main meeting rooms, six breakout rooms, a 6,200-sf ballroom with a 46-foot ceiling, two high-tech, tiered amphitheatres that seat groups of 60-90 and 90-130, and a private executive boardroom. The resort proudly proclaims that in 1994,



The Miami Biltmore Hotel and Resort, which opened in 1926, is a National Historic Landmark. It offers 75,000 sf of function space.

Pres. Bill Clinton hosted 34 heads of state at the Summit of the Americas held at the CCA.

- The property also offers:
- 33 meeting spaces, including 12 in the hotel and 14 in the CCA.

It has a great location right on the beach, yet it’s easily accessible to shopping, the airport and activities available in Miami.

**LYANA BLOKHINA**  
CEO, LBright Events



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  - High speed internet available throughout the property.
- Finally, it’s just minutes from downtown Coral Gables’ renowned restaurants, boutiques, businesses, and the famed Miracle Mile.

### FORT LAUDERDALE/HOLLYWOOD BECKONS

The local CVB was equally helpful for a planner who wanted to book during the annual South Beach Food & Wine Festival. “Since we hold our program in high season and typically during one of the city’s major events, we find that we need to book the hotel at least two to three years in advance to ensure we get a few properties to choose from,” says Sandra Edstrom, CMP, FLMI, client relations and events manager, corporate marketing for an Orlando-based company. She finds the services of the local CVB to be invaluable. Specifically, “Miami has so many options to hold meetings and events that the best way for me to narrow down my options is to call the AVP, convention sales to assist with the RFP process. I have been working with her for roughly eight years, and she understands my program and what types of properties work

best for us. Partnering with the local CVB is a huge time saver for me.”

Every February, Edstrom plans a symposium, a client appreciation event with an educational component, for about 75 attendees from the Midwest, Northeast and Canada. “Miami is such an attractive destination for our clients, offering a welcome change from the cold and snowy weather they have experienced for months,” she says. For February, after consulting with the local CVB, she settled on Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort up-beach from the high season hubbub of Miami. “This boutique hotel is quintessential South Florida, with a tropical vibe that I am excited to have our clients experience,” she says. “It checked all of the boxes for us: It’s an easy destination to get to, it’s located on the beach, offers meeting space that can accommodate a U-shape configuration for our sessions, and has several outdoor meal function space options to choose from.”

Located a mere 15-minute drive from the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, the 349-room, 17-story Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort offers 30,000 sf of event space right on the beach. JWB Prime Steak and Seafood is the most upscale of the resort’s multiple Jimmy Buffett-inspired eateries, with a raw bar that offers items including a Seafood Tower of oysters, clams, red king crab, shrimp, ceviche and lobster, and a dinner menu that boasts a 32-ounce Tomahawk steak, and a catch of the day that has literally been speared by fishermen trained in that technique. The 5 o’clock Somewhere Bar & Grill not only offers attendees a fire pit and nightly sunset rituals, but it’s also doubles as a water taxi stop along the Intracoastal Waterway. Attendees can make their way to various spots along the beach to Fort Lauderdale if they have a mind to.

On-site activities include a Flow-Rider surfing simulator, paddle boarding and snorkeling. Edstrom plans to offer her group a two-hour catamaran tour arranged by the

hotel DMC as well as a round of golf. Two nearby courses are The Club at Emerald Hills and the Hollywood Beach Golf Club.

About 20 minutes inland from Hollywood Beach is a spectacular resort, the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Hollywood, one of Florida’s two Seminole Hard Rock hotels. Only months ago, the resort finished a \$1.5 billion expansion that adds to the existing 465 room, 12-story Hard Rock Hotel. One of the

most photographed elements of this new version of the resort is the 450-foot tall, 638-room, shaped-exactly-like-a-guitar hotel, complete with LED strings that light up at night. A daily sunset light show synchronizes with the beats of any selected music. Inside the musical marvel are the traditional Italian restaurant Cipresso, with a copious wine list where Italian grapes are the star, and the 24-hour eatery Rise Kitchen & Deli, which offers sandwiches, sal-



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## FLORIDA »

ads, burgers and a juice bar. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, attendees get a clear view of the adjacent and quite new 13.5-acre pool lagoon. Some of the suites in the seven-story, 168-room Oasis Tower offer swim-up rooms from and to this lagoon.

The lagoon brings the total number of on-site pools to six, with 18 acres of water property-wide, separated into three waterfront areas that mimic the natural world. Two white sand beaches, waterfalls, palm trees, a rock mountain, a 182-foot water slide, poolside cabanas equipped with TVs, refrigerators, phones and ceiling fans, and what the resort describes as a “water expanse, nearly as long as three football fields,” where attendees can canoe and paddle board, are just a few of the many sensational locations planners can choose from when imagining a reception or dining event.

The 44,000-sf DAER South Florida complex, consisting of DAER Nightclub, DAER Dayclub and rooftop bar, is also new. DAER Nightclub has more than 18,000 sf of indoor space that can transform into an indoor-outdoor venue, with views of the pool lagoon and a giant LED centerpiece; the Dayclub offers a dipping pool, daybeds, 13 private cabanas and DJ entertainment.



**Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort offers 30,000 sf of event space. On-site activities include a FlowRider surfing simulator and snorkeling.**

Even more that's new: 120,000 sf of designated meeting space, including a carpeted exhibition hall, ballrooms and atriums, that can accommodate as many as 5,000 attendees. Of course, these are only the spaces specifically tagged for meetings. Pretty much the entire resort cries out to be the backdrop for some sort of gathering or event, including areas in the 42,000-sf Rock Spa and Salon and the new Hard Rock Live entertainment arena which holds 7,000 people.

Perhaps the most dazzling element of the reimagined space is the lobby, although ‘lobby’ is a decidedly a low-achieving word to describe the space. It is called The Oculus — a shock-and-awe show of dancing

water and lights in a kind of holographic projection as ongoing event. It was designed with the potential to produce numerous types of projections, offering planners many possibilities for discussions about how to ‘wow’ attendees with branding. A lobby bar of the same name offers the possibility to add to the general disorientation with top-shelf beverages.

The Hard Rock Cafe Hollywood, also reimagined, now has an open kitchen and more seating. It's the model for all future Hard Rock Cafes. Among the resort's many dining offerings are Abiaka, an open-kitchen restaurant where the chefs grill seafood and meat over live orangewood and white oak charcoal fire grills and in coal ovens; Fresh Harvest, where the buffet includes every style of food, much of it cooked to order; and Council Oak Steaks & Seafood, yet another open kitchen with an on-site butcher shop, a dry-aging room with pink Himalayan salt walls and a 400-label wine room. If indeed there remain any edibles in South Florida that cannot be had on this property, that unlikely eventuality promises to be short-lived.

**The newly transformed Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Hollywood offers dozens of activities sure to please any attendee.**



  
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## FLORIDA »

## TAMPA IS TEMPTING

Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Tampa, the second of the state's Seminole Hard Rock hotels, has also seen an expansion to the tune of \$700 million. As in Hollywood, so too does this expansion include a new tower. The East Tower Rooms & Suites added more than 500 guest rooms to bring the resort total room capacity to about 800. Three new pools have been added, including an expanded pool and deck area for special events, and a 26,000-sf Rock Spa & Salon, sister to Hollywood's and complete with its own hammam ritual room, is also new. The resort now also has a 200 seat Cipresso, where attendees can enjoy a menu that includes handmade pasta and pizza with the dough of one of the signature pizzas fermented for two days, fresh limoncello and craft cocktails. The restaurant also has a 16-seat private dining room for intimate group outings. Also of recent vintage is artisanal coffee and pastries outpost Constant Grind; the Pool Bar & Grill, where gelato is made on-site and some specialty drinks are served in a pouch, the better to enjoy poolside, and a new wine-tasting room and shop, The Cellar. The finishing touches have just been added to a new, 1,500-seat Hard Rock Event



Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Hollywood's 30,000-sf gaming area offers 3,100 slot machines and nearly 200 table games.

Center, complete with a 17,000-sf ballroom as part of a total of 30,000 sf of space, which still awaits the first planner's review. Still awaiting updates are the Hard Rock Cafe, which will be remodeled in line with Hollywood's, and the Rise Kitchen & Bakery, which will be redesigned and relocated on the resort.

Also on Florida's Gulf Coast, sits Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa. The 287-room hotel offers 20,000 sf of flexible indoor function space, including the 4,000-sf Aqualea Ballroom, 6,500 sf of private, outdoor function space overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, and the 4,000-sf Sky Terrace on the roof with adjoining suites, and the pool

deck terrace high on the eighth floor.

As for dining, the resort offers five options: SHOR American Seafood Grill, which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner; Swim Bar & Grill, for sandwiches and appetizers; Off SHOR; SHOR To Go and Market. There is also Sandava Spa, a Hyatt StayFit Gym open 24 hours and poolside cabanas.

Drive a few hours north along the Gulf Coast and discover the South Walton area consisting of 16 beach neighborhoods. Each offers sun-splashed venues — from little-known boutique hotels to big-name resorts — and small-town amenities to satisfy any taste. Some of the brand names include: Courtyard by Marriott Sandestin at Grand Boulevard, Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, Embassy Suites Destin-Miramar Beach and Hyatt Place Sandestin at Grand Boulevard.

## JACKSONVILLE RATED A FAVORITE

Last fall, Mandie Adler, executive assistant of medical device company Minneapolis, Minnesota-based Medtronic, brought a group of 91

Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Tampa, has undergone a \$700 million expansion.

## A DAILY SUNSET LIGHT SHOW SYNCHRONIZES WITH THE BEATS OF ANY SELECTED MUSIC.

attendees at the senior director level and above, including vice presidents, to the Marriott Jacksonville. "The majority of the company leadership was in attendance," she says. The occasion? A five-day strategy meeting for 2020. A local subsidiary of Medtronic holds small quarterly meetings at the hotel, but this was Adler's foray, she says, noting that it was on the recommendation of other Medtronic teams that she chose the venue. The location was also a big selling point. The group "used restaurants for casual meals or get-togethers, and had catered team dinners. Any changes were made fast and efficiently," she says, citing Marriott Jacksonville's "excellent hospitality. Everyone was super accommodating. Planning was flawless and efficient; I would use this hotel every time and would change nothing. Our ops team goes quarterly and will continue to."

Co-existing in and near Jacksonville are the hippest of microbreweries and fish shacks, each offering attendees a sense of the unique flavor of the area. Given that, attendees will be forgiven for wanting to go off property for experiential visits. The executives did in fact engage in a favored local pastime, the brewery

Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach Resort and Spa offers 20,000 sf of flexible indoor function space, including the 4,000-sf Aqualea Ballroom.



In Jacksonville, attendees can visit breweries and collect gifts based on the number of stamps in their Jax Ale Trail Brewery Passport.

tour. Visit Jacksonville's Jax Ale Trail Brewery Passport gives attendees the option to hit up 19 local breweries and collect swag based on how often the passport is stamped. Elsewhere in town, attendees can scout out the signature food venues of Jacksonville, called 'fish camps.' These seafood shacks, some only reachable by boat, showcase the local day's catch such as Mayport shrimp, crawfish and, for the more enterprising attendees, alligator sausage.

Adler's group was there in time to see some of the fruits of the first part of the hotel's multimillion-dollar renovation plans. All guest rooms were upgraded with a new palate and more comfortable bedding and linens. A Concierge Lounge was added serving complimentary food including an American breakfast, and late-night

snacks, bar service and a general quiet space for working or one-on-ones. The lounge is reserved for attendees in Concierge-Level rooms. Next to be renovated will be, essentially, every other part of the hotel. The lobby lounge, bar and restaurant, together with the Lobby Bar and Bistro 202 will compose the new branded 'Great-room' and will be redesigned and the menu refocused on Florida-sourced ingredients and should be unveiled shortly. Marriott is also upgrading the nearly 20,000 sf of meeting space with new furniture and updated technology — up to 750 attendees can fit into the largest of these spaces. The pool deck and fitness center will also get a more modern redesign.

All that and more means planners can never go wrong with Florida. **C&IT**



## ON THE MOVE //



ANDERSON

Waldorf Astoria Las Vegas has appointed **Christopher Anderson** as director of Sales and Marketing. In his new role, Anderson will strategize to position and secure the hotel as the premier luxury location for meetings and events.

Hilton Palacio del Rio has appointed **Alecia Beebe** as sales manager for the San Antonio-based hotel. Beebe, with nearly three years of hospitality experience, will focus on building the Hilton Palacio del Rio brand and service offerings throughout the United States.

The Higgins Hotel & Conference Center has welcomed **Marc Becker** as director of Sales and Marketing. Becker will supervise overall sales efforts for the 1940s-inspired hotel. He is an active member and past president of Meeting Professionals International, a past Board member for Hospitality Sales Marketing Association, and currently serves on the Marketing and Industry Affairs committees of the Louisiana Travel Association.

Hotel Derek in Houston has named hospitality veteran **Christi George** as the new director of Sales and Marketing. Previously, George was area director of Sales and Marketing for the Hilton Houston North and Houston Marriott North hotels.

Sheraton Panama City Beach Golf & Spa Resort (formerly known as Sheraton Bay Point Resort), has welcomed **David Griffin** as its new director of Sales and Marketing. Griffin will lead all sales and marketing efforts as the iconic destination unveils a complete restoration and new name following the October 2018 impact of Hurricane Michael. Griffin brings nearly 35 years of hospitality experience to his new role.

**Shannon Hartman** has been appointed as director of Sales and Marketing for Emeline, a new Charleston hotel concept by Makeready, opening spring of 2020. Hartman will oversee the Sales, Marketing and Events teams handling Emeline, Hank's Loft and the newly introduced Hank's Social Hall. She brings 20 years of sales, marketing and project management experience to her new role.

The Curtis, a retro-chic lifestyle hotel located in the heart of downtown Denver, has named **Megan Pierce** director of Group Sales. In her new role, Piece will spearhead new business development strategies that generate group revenue for the hotel and events venue. A tenured industry professional with more than a decade of hospitality leadership experience, Pierce brings extensive corporate sales and catering expertise to the hotel.

Hyatt Regency Boston — located in Downtown Crossing — has promoted **Chahrazade Benkada** from sales and events office manager to business travel sales manager. In her new role, Benkada will oversee all lodging and event needs for local and corporate industry clients. In addition, Hyatt Regency Boston has named **Matthew R. Danto** new associate director of Sales and Events, and welcomed **Carlos E. Rojas** as its director of Sales, Marketing and Events. In his new role, Danto will oversee all lodging and event needs for all corporate groups and co-lead the group and event sales teams. Rojas, with more than 17 years of hospitality experience, will work with his team to strategically meet sales goals, oversee marketing efforts and manage the execution of signature events. **C&IT**



BEEBE



GEORGE



HARTMAN



BENKADA



ROJAS



BECKER



GRIFFIN



PIERCE



DANTO



ELINOR STEELE, VP Global Communications,  
Tupperware Brand Corporation

### WHEN TUPPERWARE WORKED WITH DISNEY FOR THEIR EVENT...

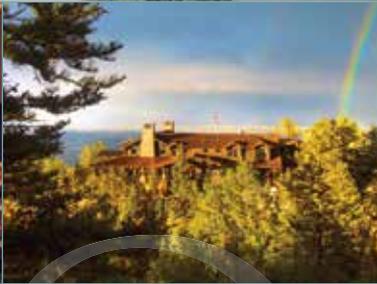
Elinor Steele's goal was clear, but not easy: she wanted to inspire her guests above all else. She says that Disney made this happen, creating an event that reignited passion for the company and its culture—a passion that the people took with them when they left. That's what happens when you work with Disney: your story isn't simply told. It's experienced, by every single guest. If this is the kind of inspiration you're looking for, just use our imagination.



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