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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

Life's a Beach

The Sun, Sand, Water and Beauty Make Meetings Fun Again and Energize Attendees

PAGE 10



An authentic Caribbean beach party on Sandals Resorts' private offshore island.



The Best of the Best
19th Annual
Greens Of Distinction
Winners

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Second-Tier Cities ● Orlando
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Photo courtesy of Sandals Resorts

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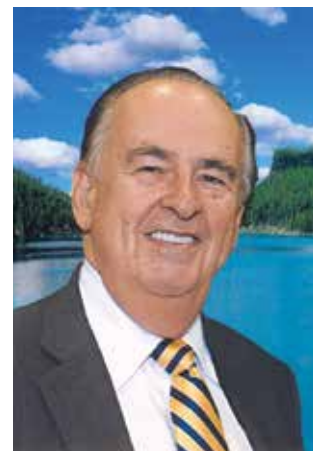
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Back to the Beach

According to the June 2013 Business Barometer, the bi-monthly industry report from the Meeting Professionals International Foundation, business conditions continue to gradually improve due to perceived economic stability. U.S. meeting professionals, who predicted a 3.5 percent increase of business levels in the barometer published in April 2013, now predict a 4.25 percent growth rate. Other trends show that lead times are increasing due to higher demand and less availability; components such as live streaming, content on demand, remote interactive sessions and webinars also are providing more value; the combined use of novel, engaging, interactive and on-demand strategies as a way to delight attendees and improve overall value also is on the upswing; and planners are trying new room setups, furnishings, technologies and ways to describe and deliver relevant information.



What's more, in today's seller's market, higher costs are driving the need for more efficiency and innovation.

Little innovation is needed when meeting at the beach — it's built in. The reinvigorating powers of the sea and sun and endless beauty of a tropical vista are priceless. Authentic experiences such as a beach party at Sandals Resorts' private offshore island in the Caribbean (see our cover photo) increase the value of meeting at the beach. Additional benefits such as higher attendance and the opportunity to tack on a family vacation can't be beat.

Also in the cover story "Life's a Beach" on page 10, Linda Raterman, COO at Cincinnati Sports Medicine and Orthopedic Center in Ohio, notes, "We try to combine business and pleasure, because for many doctors it is becoming increasingly difficult or challenging not only to manage your time off, but also the money you're spending. So if you can combine a meeting with a vacation, that is appealing to many of them." Also, Sharon Brown, owner of Sharon Brown Events in Indiana, says, "Every planner for every event now is looking to drive attendance. And one factor for attendees, in considering which meetings they will go to, is the difference between a meeting at a fun, relaxing location, versus one that is not as attractive."

Remember, however, when you don't meet at the beach, go for the golf. For the best of the best, see the winners of our 2013 Greens of Distinction Awards on page 17.

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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Kirchgesler Joins Team San Jose as CEO

SAN JOSE, CA — Team San Jose has named veteran industry executive Karolyn Kirchgesler as its new CEO, effective late September. Currently president and CEO of Visit Saint Paul,

Kirchgesler recently completed a three-year term as board member for Destination Marketing Association International. She will work closely with Team San Jose COO Dave Costain, a

30-year hospital-ity industry veteran, Team San Jose's board of directors and executive team, and City of San Jose administration to continue the organization's recent progress in business and economic development. www.sanjose.org



KIRCHGESLER

Omni to Build Hotel in Downtown Tempe

IRVING, TX — Omni Hotels & Resorts will develop a new hotel in downtown Tempe, AZ, at USA Place, a multiuse development. The 330-room hotel will have 30,000 sf of conference center and ballroom space including grand and junior ballrooms, 10 meeting rooms and dual boardrooms. The hotel, conference center, event center and first phase of residential and retail is scheduled to open during the second half of 2015. www.omnihotels.com

Caesars Entertainment to Open Horseshoe Baltimore in 2014

LAS VEGAS, NV — The \$400 million Horseshoe Baltimore by Caesars Entertainment, a full-service gaming and entertainment venue, is expected to open in late 2014. Horseshoe Baltimore will feature an outward-facing urban casino design, three premier restaurants, several bars and restaurants, and a multipurpose entertainment space. The facility will offer approximately 7,670 sf of function space in addition to 4,615 sf of prefunction space. www.cetmeetings.com

IN&OUT

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2013 MPI-WEC: Meeting Professionals International hosted nearly 3,000 attendees for its annual World Education Congress July 20–23 at Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas. With a theme of “Transformation,” the conference featured more than 60 educational sessions, multiple networking opportunities, corporate social responsibility events and a hosted buyer program. MPI reports that attendance achieved a 50/50 planner/supplier balance. **1** A signing ceremony for the Memorandum of Understanding between MPI and the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) took place at the MPI Leadership Media Briefing and Breakfast: *Pictured left to right:* newly elected MPI Board Chair Michael Dominguez; TCEB Director of MICE Capabilities Nichapa Yoswee; and newly appointed MPI President and CEO Paul Van Deventer. **2** Corporate Social Responsibility programs during the Congress benefited Clean the World (*shown*), an organization that recycles lightly used hotel soaps and amenities for redistribution to countries in need. Also, a powerful teambuilding activity sponsored by Odyssey Teams, Helping Hands: Connecting Heads, Hands and Hearts, had participants assembling prosthetic hands for distribution to amputees in 65 developing countries. **3** A hosted buyer reception allowed planners to network following appointments. **4** It was in the cards for attendees to have fun networking and playing at The World Series of Poker Tournament at The Big Deal, which raised money for the MPI Foundation. **5** More than 60 knowledge sessions generated illumination, conversation and inspiration. **6** The RendezVoo networking bash at the VooDoo Rooftop Nightclub at Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino raised funds for the MPI Foundation and showcased spectacular views of the Las Vegas Strip. **7** The Hosted Buyer Program got business done over three days of face-to-face appointments. The 2014 World Education Congress will be held August 2–5 in Minneapolis.



By Kari Wendel

Meetings Strategy 3.0: Advancing Functional Objectives Across the Organization

Meeting planning has come a long way over the past couple of decades, having evolved from an organic practice to a managed profession that now integrates with procurement and other areas of the business. Transformations have taken place and best practices have been established, which is leading to another pivot point in the industry that I refer to as Meetings Strategy 3.0.

Meetings were designed to bring people together for a specific purpose or business reason. Historically, planners have had to deal with a perception in the corporate world that meetings were simply excuses to throw big, lavish parties without a defined purpose. As we know, this perception brought a heightened focus on meetings spend in the late 1990s and early 2000s due in part to the shift of procurement's focus from primarily tangible goods to include services such as meetings. The Strategic Meetings Management (SMM) practice was born during this time, with the original focus being primarily on spend control. Then the recession hit and not only did spend controls tighten, but planners were expected to defend the true value of their meetings and quantify the return on investment for their organizations.

Thus, the pivot point is defined. Meetings are now being elevated as a vehicle for business success to attain specific objectives. SMM is no longer only about spend management, but can be used as a strategy to drive business and functional objectives forward. While travel and procurement have in some part been utilizing meetings to drive their functional objectives already, their counterparts in marketing, sales and finance are beginning to see the benefits that meetings can have within their functions. This is great news for planners and the meetings function as a whole, as it speaks volumes to the value that meetings provide to any organization.

Marketing is responsible for communicating the value of a company's products and/or services to its customers, while also driving brand awareness and managing corporate reputation. In order to achieve these objectives, marketing needs

the ability to shift and influence corporate messaging both with internal and external stakeholders. Meetings provide that platform, allowing access to select colleagues, such as those in sales or other client-facing roles, who will serve as the embodiment of the brand to customers and ultimately be responsible for influencing purchasing behavior. On the other hand, if a company is launching a new consumer-facing product, the marketing team likely will be held responsible for communicating the value to external influencers such as analysts, bloggers and journalists, who have the ability to impact the company's success in the marketplace.

Meetings provide the touch points that marketing professionals need to drive their business objectives and can provide a measurable return on investment, which can be communicated up to the C-suite. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the Exhibit & Event Marketers Association in partnership with the CMO Council found

that 89 percent of marketers say events still hold some level of importance and value for their organizations, and 31 percent consider them essential. Events within the marketing function are primarily viewed as revenue-driving opportunities, as they allow for intimate face-to-face conversations with customers, prospects and influencers.

On a related note, sales meetings also provide key face-to-face opportunities to drive results, and with the advent of technology, clients and prospects can now opt in to future opportunities on the spot, in real time. For example, pharmaceutical reps have the ability to sign up doctors for upcoming education sessions via a live registration link that they can access during their meeting instead of asking the doctor to visit a website at a later date to register. Integrating this functionality with current meeting activity greatly increases the value of the one-on-one meetings and oftentimes leads to higher attendance at larger educational and sales conferences, which in turn may drive revenue for the company.

While procurement professionals focus on sourcing, cost

“Meetings offer one of the **largest savings opportunities** in the corporate world today.”



Kari Wendel

drives CWT Meetings & Events' Strategic Meetings Management (SMM) practice in the Americas region, where she is responsible for leading a team of program management professionals who identify and implement strategies for ongoing improvement of clients' M&E programs. www.cwt-meetings-events.com

containment and savings, finance professionals are often looking at the bigger picture: debt payment terms and back-end rebates on payment vehicles. So, while they may not be using meetings to drive sales of a particular product or service, they have a vested interest from a dollars and cents perspective. Meetings offer one of the largest savings opportunities in the corporate world today, ranging from 10 to 25 percent. This may be one of the last savings opportunities of this size, so it's no wonder it's become a focus area in recent years. Buying in a prescriptive fashion and driving high volume to preferred suppliers allows procurement professionals to realize discounts for the organization while finance looks at holding on to that cash for other investments and to pay down existing debt.

Finally, let's take a look at how the travel function can use meetings to meet their business objectives. Travel is travel no matter how you slice it, meaning that people travel the same whether they are on the road for a business meeting, industry conference or personal client connection. The process feels the

same regardless of the purpose of the trip, so travel managers can look to leverage meeting travel in their safety and security programs, hotel program development and deployment, and card programs to drive efficiency and savings, contributing to the bottom line. Additionally, traveler tools, including on-the-ground services and mobile apps, can be leveraged across functions to enhance the travel experience overall.

Meetings have become more than a way to bring people together; they drive business results across multiple functions of the organization, providing exceptional value for the company. Some companies are beginning to put meetings management practices into place, while others haven't yet begun to think about them. Beyond these specific functional areas, companies also can look at utilizing meetings to fulfill other corporate goals around company culture, employee on-boarding and corporate social responsibility, to name a few. Just think about how this could showcase the value of the meeting planning function to the C-suite!

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The beach on the private peninsula at Sandals Emerald Bay Resort in Great Exuma, Bahamas is an ideal setting for group gatherings day and night.

Photo courtesy of Sandals Resorts

Life's a Beach

By John Buchanan

The Sun, Sand, Water and Beauty Make Meetings Fun Again and Energize Attendees

After several years of hand-wringing and speculation about whether the meeting industry would ever fully recover from its unprecedented downturn, many companies are putting the fun back into their meetings and events. And there is no better way to do that than with meeting at a beach resort.

Sharon Brown, owner of Sharon Brown Events in Noblesville, IN, is a longtime proponent of beach meetings. She has done them in Hilton Head, SC, as well as Florida and California.

"One of the reasons we use beach properties is that in many cases we are looking for a destination where attendees can get away from the office, get to know folks, network and relax and think outside the box a little bit," says Brown, who has hosted multiple meetings at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa.

But another important factor in favor of beach-based events is that they typically

increase attendance as well as attendee enthusiasm and engagement. "Every planner for every event now is looking to drive attendance," Brown says. "And one factor for attendees, in considering which meetings they will go to, is the difference between a meeting at a fun, relaxing location, versus one that is not as attractive. And for a beach meeting, attendees often bring their families for an extended stay."

Linda Raterman, chief operating officer at Cincinnati Sports Medicine and Orthopedic Center in Ohio, is another longtime fan of beach meetings. She has hosted one of her company's most important and successful meetings in Hilton Head every Memorial Day weekend for the last 23 years.

"We try to combine business and pleasure, because for many doctors it is becoming increasingly difficult or challenging not only to manage your time off, but also the money you're spending,"

Raterman says. "So if you can combine a meeting with a vacation, that is appealing to many of them."

The ability to come to Hilton Head over a major annual holiday and earn continuing medical education (CME) credits, while also enjoying a round of golf or tennis or the pampering of spa treatments, is a big lure for many doctors and others who attend Raterman's annual event.

"They are choosing to spend their time and their dollars at our meeting," she says. "So they are really looking for the biggest bang for the buck. And doing a well-established, popular meeting in Hilton Head every year helps us deliver that."

Barbara McNulty, CMP, president of International Seminars in Fort Lauderdale, FL, also specializes in CME and other medical meetings — and sometimes uses Caribbean beach resorts to increase the wow factor. She agrees with Raterman that doctors and other medical practitioners

today want to combine education with some rest and relaxation.

"The reason my clients do beach meetings in the Caribbean," McNulty says with a laugh, "is that's where people want to go."

Puerto Rico

Although its beaches and pristine waters rival any in the world for natural beauty, Puerto Rico offers a unique advantage it shares with the U.S. Virgin Islands: it is American soil. The U.S. dollar is its currency, and no passport is required to get there.

With new luxury properties and landmark hotels, one-of-a-kind group activities, distinctive event sites and world-class cuisine and entertainment, Puerto Rico continues to gain popularity with planners who want a memorable, sophisticated destination at an affordable cost.

Kim Lyons, director of global accounts at ConferenceDirect in Morristown, NJ,

has used Puerto Rico for several meetings in recent years.

The key factors in its favor, Lyons says, are its easy access, use of the U.S. dollar, lack of requirement for a passport and the fact that English is widely spoken.

"It's just an easy destination," Lyons says. "And everybody is looking for easy these days."

Her clients — and especially pharmaceutical companies — like Puerto Rico because it represents something different from and more exotic than a typical beach destination. "And that's especially true for clients that have exhausted the possibilities in Florida and are looking for some variety," she says. "Everybody has been to Florida. But not everyone has been to Puerto Rico. So that just makes it a more special experience for a lot of people. And companies realize that means they will already have something of a wow factor, because it gives people an experience they're

not used to. And in turn, I find that builds a ripple of extra excitement."

And, Lyons says, Puerto Rico delivers one essential benefit in spades: "It also has beautiful beaches."

She also has high praise for Puerto Rico's hotel product, which ranges from mega-resorts to intimate boutique-style properties. She particularly favors El Conquistador, A Waldorf Astoria Resort; San Juan Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino and Gran Melia Golf Resort.

Another important benefit of Puerto Rico, Lyons says, is its value proposition. "I find that there is a lot of flexibility in Puerto Rico in terms of being willing to work within your budget," she says. "Of course, that is true in many other destinations since the recession. But it is particularly true in Puerto Rico."

And because the U.S. dollar is its currency, Puerto Rico also represents an opportunity to lock in pricing, even years in



The Caribe Hilton Hotel, located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, offers ideal spaces for beach meetings.

Photo courtesy of Caribe Hilton

advance, which removes the potentially negative budget impact of any future currency exchange fluctuations. “That is a major bonus,” Lyons says.

Another distinctive attribute of Puerto Rico is its local food scene, which features fresh seafood.

“And that lends itself to beachside barbecues and parties,” Lyons says. “And you don’t have to spend a lot of money on a backdrop. The beauty of the beach is all you need.”

Popular Options

For her medical meetings and seminars, McNulty has had consistent suc-

cess in Aruba and The Islands of the Bahamas. But, she cautions, when it comes to Caribbean events, a site visit is critical.

“It’s important to go check out the resort you’re planning to use, because there are some that are not that great,” McNulty says. “You also have to make sure they have beautiful beaches. And if they have a casino, that is an added plus for many attendees. A lot of people also want a golf course, so it’s important to see that, too. You just have to make sure the property really does have everything you and your attendees are looking for.”

In January, McNulty hosted a six-

night seminar for 150 anesthesiologists and nurse-anesthetists at the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino.

Why Aruba? “We actually asked attendees where they wanted to go, and they said Aruba,” McNulty says. “Our audience loves Aruba.” And that’s why her client has been back multiple times in recent years.

For the January meeting, the most memorable highlight for McNulty was the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino located on Palm Beach. “There are just all kinds of things going on,” she says. “There’s a lot to do. And for most of my attendees, just going to the beach is the best form of recreation there is.”

McNulty opened the event with a welcome reception on the beach. And once the meeting was underway, some attendees used their free time to play golf at a nearby course, while others simply lounged on the pristine white sand beach.

McNulty is also partial to mega-resort Atlantis, Paradise Island in the Bahamas. This December, she will host her 11th

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consecutive annual meeting there for 100–150 nurse anesthetists.

Atlantis is a unique ocean-themed destination on Paradise Island. It features a variety of accommodations, all built around a 141-acre waterscape comprised of more than 20 million gallons of fresh and saltwater lagoons, pools and habitats. The sprawling resort complex also includes Dolphin Cay, an interactive and education center created to enlighten visitors about dolphins.

The complex also includes Cove Atlantis, a 600-room resort, and restaurants from chefs including Nobu Matsuhisa, Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Bobby Flay.

“Atlantis has a number of great restaurants,” McNulty says. “I also like the casino and the spa. The casino is fun, and the spa is spectacular.”

Another aspect that McNulty likes is its meeting and convention facilities, located under one roof. “The meeting space is great,” she says. “And it is a very clean facility.”

Why has Atlantis remained her venue for the meeting for a decade? “We do an annual post-meeting survey of attendees, and every year, they say they want to go back to Atlantis,” she says.

Beach meetings and incentive programs conducted in the lap of luxury also are a specialty at Sandals Emerald Bay in Great Exuma, Bahamas. This 245-unit oceanfront resort, lined by a mile-long stretch of white-sand beach and only 10 minutes from the airport, features nearly 20,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meetings facilities including the 5,500-sf Nautilus Ballroom. Other services and amenities include Wi-Fi Internet access, a Red Lane Spa and Greg Norman-designed golf course, seven restaurants and six bars, three pools including a half-acre infinity pool and three whirlpools.

In addition, water sports such as scuba diving, snorkeling, sailing, sea kayaking, windsurfing and stand-up paddle boarding abound.

Another fine option for a memorable incentive program is Sandals Royal Bahamian resort in Nassau.

In April, a professional meeting planner

for a global meetings and events company, hosted an incentive program of 124 attendees at Sandals Royal Bahamian. The planner says, “While I consider the group to be particular about their accommodations, event space, décor, food and activities, Sandals’ staff did not. They handled all of the details in stride and to the utmost satisfaction of the client. From a smooth arrival that was attended by heads of most departments and the hotel manager himself, to the onsite events, offsite challenges and a glamorous awards dinner, Sandals handled the details as if the group consisted of royalty.”

The veteran planner offers a few more examples of Sandals’ “royal” treatment. She says the extra efforts included “acquiring a sand wheelchair, inviting the clients’ VIPs to lead the Junkanoo parade, provid-



A rendering of the 223-room Sandals La Source Grenada set to open in December.

Photo courtesy of Sandals Resorts

ing extra photographers at events, cooking the clients’ freshly caught fish and assisting with a passport lost offsite.”

Another important key to a seamless event, according to this travel planner, is to relax and leave the worry to the resort. She adds, “you never have to worry about finding help at Sandals. The department managers and hotel executives treat all tasks as their own — not just those within their department. They made my travel staff relax while making all of us look like heroes for such smooth operations. The clients were treated to beautiful surroundings and amazing service. For the first time in their incentive program history, they will repeat a destination and resort by returning to the Sandals Royal Bahamian.”

Grenada is another island retreat that is ideal for incentive programs and small corporate meetings. Located northwest of Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada is also known as the “Island of Spice” because it

is one of the largest exporters of nutmeg and mace crops.

Sandals LaSource, Sandals’ newest resort, is located along the pristine Pink Gin Beach in Grenada. Scheduled to open in December 2013, LaSource features 225 elegant rooms and suites and meeting facilities. Lavish amenities include custom-built, contemporary furniture and marble floors. Top-tier accommodations include private infinity-edge plunge pools on the balcony.

Sandals’ first world-class steak house, and eight more restaurants will serve delectable specialties from around the world. Additionally, the new resort will offer unlimited land and water sports including scuba diving, snorkeling and stand-up paddle-boarding as well as optional pampering treatments at the Red Lane Spa.

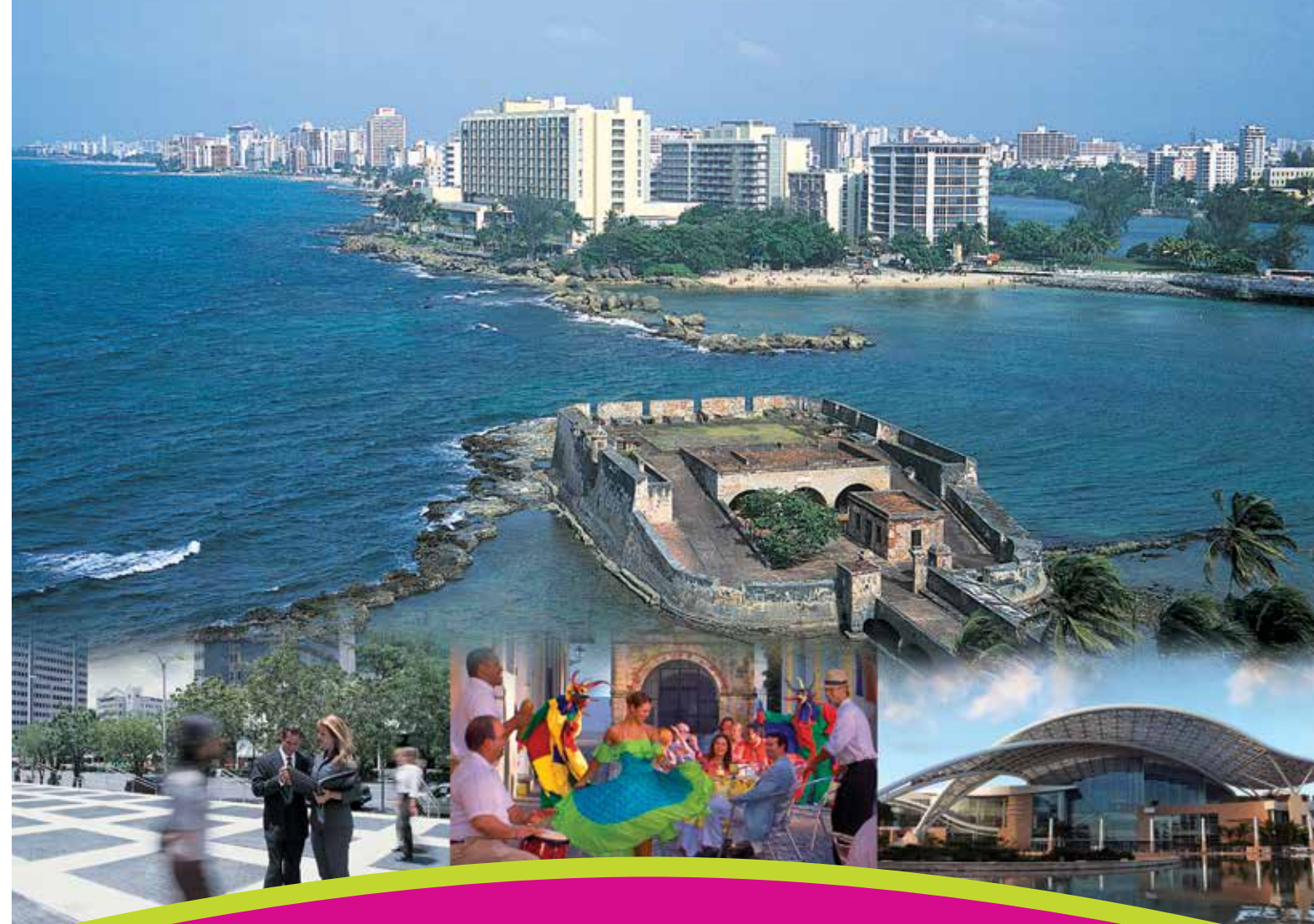
Throughout the Caribbean, Sandals has played host to many of the biggest, brightest and fastest growing organizations in the world. Companies can inspire, entertain or educate their attendees at any one or more of the nine properties in the Sandals Luxury Meetings and Incentives Collection, which includes Sandals Grande Antigua, St. Johns, Antigua; Sandals Grande St.

Lucian, Castries, St. Lucia; Sandals La Source, St. George’s, Grenada; Sandals Grande Riviera, Ocho Rios, Jamaica; Sandals Whitehouse, Whitehouse, Jamaica; Sandals Royal Plantation, Ocho Rios, Jamaica; Sandals Royal Bahamian, Nassau, Bahamas; Sandals Emerald Bay, Great Exuma, Bahamas; Beaches Turks & Caicos; Providenciales, Turks & Caicos.

Domestic Bliss

While McNulty has a long history of loyalty to Caribbean resorts, Raterman has enjoyed successful meetings every year for almost a quarter century at the Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa.

“It has a resort feel, but it also feels like an intimate property,” Raterman says. “It feels like a boutique hotel and is quite charming. It’s also upscale, but without being overwhelming. It’s just a very nice, comfortable property that is family- and couple-friendly.”



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That's important to Raterman, because more than 60 percent of her attendees bring their family along for a vacation. "This year, at least 70 percent brought either their spouse or their entire family," she says. "And Hilton Head has something to offer every age and demographic group, including children. You can play golf and tennis. You can hike and bike. And The Westin has a lovely onsite children's program."

Another nice amenity at The Westin is its fairly new poolside cabanas. "For a well-traveled audience, that is a nice amenity," Raterman says. "You have comfortable chairs and a refrigerator and a large-screen TV. And that's very nice for people who want more than a beach umbrella."

Such a mix of amenities is key to the success of Raterman's annual event. "Physicians have a lot of options in terms of how they meet their CME obligations," she says. "So what we try to do is first of all realize that the destination is key. Secondly, the time of year is important, depending on a doctor's specialty or subspecialty. You don't want to be competing with other meetings in the field at the same time of year."

Raterman and her attendees also like Hilton Head Island because it is upscale and laidback, but not too secluded. "For us, Hilton Head has withstood the test of

time," Raterman says, "because it's beautiful, but it's also affordable."

As a result, she says, the meeting draws a lot of repeat attendees, as well as international attendees from 14 countries.

And one of the big draws is the beach. That's why every year, Raterman arranges a beach party buffet on Memorial Day on the spectacular outdoor deck at The Westin.

Many meeting destinations that have "beach" in their name such as Newport Beach and Long Beach, CA, Daytona Beach, FL, Myrtle Beach, SC, and Virginia Beach, VA, are a beacon for meetings that include a pre- or post-event family vacation.

Virginia Beach is famous for its boardwalk, which stretches three miles along the Atlantic Ocean and links live music venues, amusement rides and bicycle rental shops as well as a number of nautical sculptures, the most famous of which is the 34-foot bronze King Neptune — perfect for a family portrait at the beach.

Biking is only one of the myriad fitness opportunities available in Virginia Beach, which was recently named the No. 1 Fittest City in the U.S. Ranking of the fittest cities was based on fitness-related mentions, check-ins and use of fitness apps in U.S. cities with at least 200,000 Facebook users.

Boasting a LEED Gold Certified Convention Center, Virginia Beach offers a wide variety of meeting locations and accommodations for every need under the sun.

A Room With a View and More

Beach meetings not only deliver unique benefits, but they also require some unique considerations.

One, notes Raterman, is the importance of genuine oceanfront rooms with a view.

"The Westin Hilton Head has one of the highest percentages of oceanfront and oceanview rooms on Hilton Head," she says. "And when people choose to go to a beach destination, it's important to offer that oceanfront, beach-view experience. And The Westin Hilton Head is uniquely situated to afford the majority of attendees that kind of experience — meaning good rooms. There are other hotels that

have some, but some are on the ground floor and things like that. In terms of the physical layout and orientation of the property, The Westin Hilton Head really is somewhat unique."

On a broader scale, Brown stresses that when planning a beach meeting, it's important to do everything you can to take advantage of the beach location. "For example, you usually want to stage lunches outside or do receptions outside," she says. "And when you do that, there's a big difference between outdoor events and indoor events. When you do a reception on the beach, attendees tend to stay longer than they do at a reception in a ballroom. And that also means that as a planner, it's easier for you to provide the wow factor without a lot of extra cost or extra effort. In that sense, beach meetings are easy to do, because attendees just walk out the door, and they're on the beach."

Beach meetings also offer an opportunity to adapt food and beverage to their location and serve lobster or other fresh seafood along with beach-themed specialty cocktails. "You really want to do whatever you can to highlight the area and the local cuisine," Brown says. "And it's nice whenever you can to get your food from local farmers or other local suppliers."

Brown's other tip is to do as many things as possible outdoors. "Plan at least one or two events outside," she says. "You should also try to take advantage of the things that are unique to the destination. And make sure you promote those things so people can really enjoy their attendance at the meeting."

But perhaps most important of all, Brown says, always bear in mind the singular advantage of a beach meeting from an attendee's perspective.

"A lot of the meetings we do start early in the morning and go all day," she says. "It's nice, especially at properties I really like, such as the Hyatt Regency Mission Bay in San Diego or The Westin in Hilton Head, that people can take a break and go outside and get a breath of fresh air. During their 20-minute breaks during the day, they can take a few minutes to get a little sunshine and get their energy going. And that's a real big advantage of beach meetings."

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The 34-foot bronze sculpture of King Neptune towers over the Virginia Beach boardwalk.

Photo courtesy of Virginia Beach CVB



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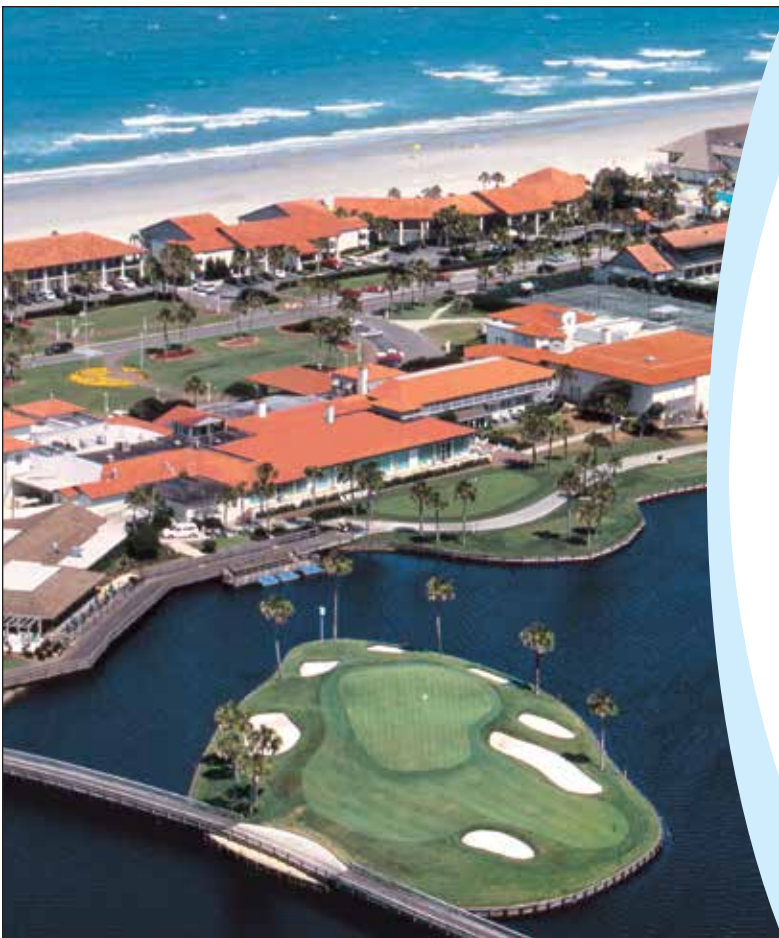
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The 998-room beachfront resort provides a host of casual and fine-dining options, two beachfront pools, a new full-service Heavenly Spa by Westin overlooking the ocean with an adjacent Westin Workout Fitness Center, Westin Kids Club, Tennis Center and two marinas with deep-water dockage and water taxi service.

The par-72, 18-hole champion golf course managed by Troon stretches 6,800 yards and features rolling fairways, eight acres of lakes and 76 bunkers. Nestled amongst 3,000 coconut and royal palm trees and 50-year-old shady banyans, the course is Audubon-certified for its many bird sanctuaries.

The Westin Executive Club Lounge offers daily complimentary continental breakfast, hors d'oeuvres and evening cocktails. *C&IT*

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The resort features 40,000 sf of indoor/outdoor event space, including a 17,000-sf ballroom, nine separate meeting rooms, two executive boardrooms, a 3,200-sf terraced event pavilion adjacent to the clubhouse, Emily's Rose Court, Plaza San Saba and the El Fortin Lawn featuring limestone arches framing the beautiful Texas Hill Country.

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Second-Tier Cities

Great Reasons to Make Them Your First Choice

By Karen Brost

Top-tier cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Orlando command a lot of attention in the meetings world, and deservedly so. But that doesn't mean that the so-called second-tier cities should be your second choice. In fact, these mid-sized cities often offer great values and unique venues that are well worth a closer look.

In a recent blog post, Christine Shimasaki, CDME, CMP, and managing director of empowerMINT.com for Destination Marketing Association International, described the distinctions between top-tier and second-tier cities.

She notes that second-tier cities are "often characterized by smaller population, smaller convention facilities and less direct airlift." Last, but certainly not least, she says that second-tier cities have an "opportunity for better value."

Andrea Brennan, CMP, senior meeting architect for Kinsley Meetings in Littleton, CO, agrees that there are better values to be found in second-tier cities. "I've also found service levels to be really great," she notes. "I don't know what to attribute that to, but I feel like they're not in that rush of a big city. People are a little bit more laidback. Things are done easily. You ask for something and it's done, and you don't have to fight for it."

She added that smaller cities are more likely to have an attitude of "What's it going to take to get you to come here and let us show you our area and what we have to offer?" She says,

"They're just more willing to negotiate with you. We have clients who need a certain number of upgrades or transfers from the airport. I just feel that second- and third-tier cities are more willing to negotiate those things."

Here's an overview of a few second-tier cities to consider:

Oklahoma City

As the largest city in the Sooner State, Oklahoma City has a population of more than 1.2 million and is conveniently located at the convergence of three major highways: I-35, I-40 and I-44. The city's Cox Convention Center, located in the



"We have clients who need a certain number of upgrades or transfers from the airport. I just feel that second- and third-tier cities are more willing to negotiate those things."

Andrea Brennan, CMP, Senior Meeting Architect
Kinsley Meetings, Littleton, CO

heart of the downtown area, contains more than 150,000 sf of total meeting space, including a 25,000-sf ballroom, 100,000 sf of exhibit space and additional meeting rooms totaling 27,500 sf.

Seven hotels are located within walking distance of the Cox Convention Center, and four additional hotels are currently under construction. The Renaissance Oklahoma City Convention Center Hotel is connected to the convention center via a second-floor skybridge for easy access. Planners who prefer a property with historic charm may want to check out the Skirvin Hilton, located

just two blocks north of the convention center. This grand hotel opened in 1911 and features original woodwork, flooring and other original architectural details.

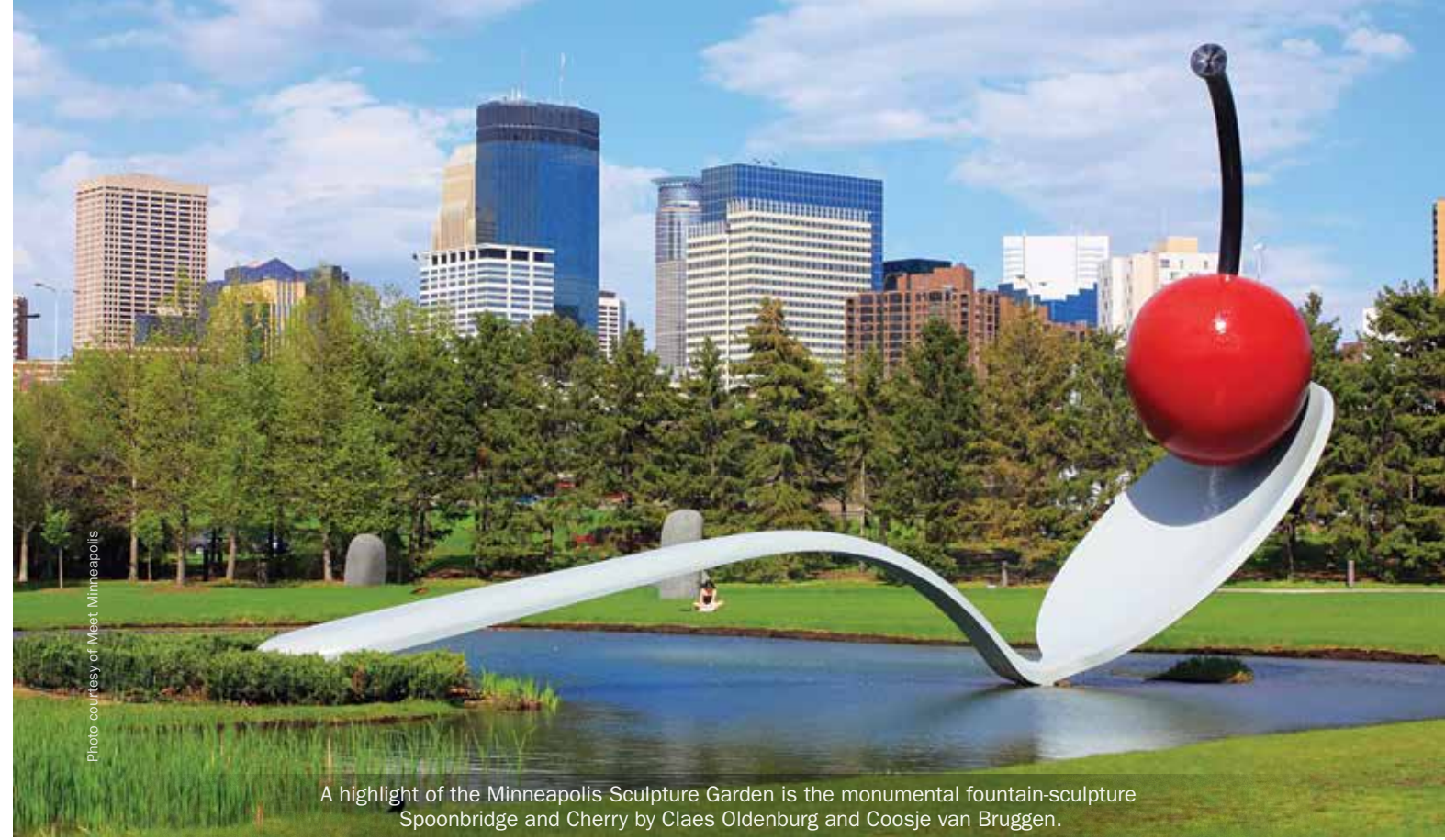
When attendees have some downtime, they'll find plenty to do in the city, including touring the Oklahoma City Museum of Art and the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. The Bricktown Entertainment District, located just steps from the convention center, is home to dozens of restaurants ranging from top-of-the-line steak houses to down-home, Oklahoma barbecue.

One unique offsite venue, the Oklahoma City Boathouse District, is located

downtown on the Oklahoma River and offers indoor meeting space in two boathouses and in the Chesapeake Finish Line Tower, as well as a large amount of outdoor space. Another option is the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, which can accommodate private events for up to 1,000 attendees.

Oklahoma City offers easy air access, with 22 nonstop flights to 19 destinations in the U.S. The Will Rogers World Airport is conveniently located just 15 minutes from downtown.

Lauren Warkentine, customer relations-account manager for Computer-



A highlight of the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is the monumental fountain-sculpture Spoonbridge and Cherry by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

Rx, recently brought 600 pharmacy employees and 75 vendor representatives to Oklahoma City for a software training meeting. They used the Renaissance Oklahoma City Convention Center Hotel as their headquarters, and have already made plans to bring the meeting back to Oklahoma City in 2014 and 2015.

"Oklahoma City has become a great place for our meeting," she says. "Oklahoma City is affordable, the space is nice and accommodating to our needs, everything in the process was well taken care of by the staff, and the food was tremendous. The city itself is clean, safe and provides a great place for the attendees to get out and enjoy the city. I received a lot of compliments during the week about how clean Oklahoma City was and how shocked they were with how much it had to offer. Our event is in April, so many attend the Oklahoma City Thunder basketball game, OKC Barrons Hockey games, dinner and nightlife in Bricktown, the Oklahoma City bombing memorial, art museums, and the list could go on."

She added that it's Oklahoma City's people who really made a difference. "I received so much feedback about how in-

credibly friendly the people in Oklahoma are, outside of just the convention area. Many people that attend our show have never been to Oklahoma and probably wouldn't come if it wasn't for our conference. However, they are always pleasantly surprised with what they find. As an Oklahoman, we often refer to Oklahoma City as 'the best kept secret.'

San Jose

According to Team San Jose, some of the city's top advantages as a meeting destination include easy access to three major airports, a compact, walkable downtown, and a diverse array of choices for dining, recreation, nightlife and attractions. It also promotes the fact that San Jose, which is the third largest city in California, is one of the safest, cleanest big cities in America.

The San Jose Convention Center (SJCC) is currently wrapping up a \$120 million expansion and renovation project that is expected to be completed later this year. The project will add 125,000 sf of meeting space to the center, bringing its total square footage to 550,000.

The software company NetSuite recently held its annual user conference,

SuiteWorld, at the SJCC. The conference attracted 5,000 attendees from 30 different countries. In the past, the event was held at hotel-based conference centers, but it has now grown so large that NetSuite held the event in a convention center for the first time.

"The biggest value there was in working with Team San Jose," explains Mini Peiris, vice president of global marketing for NetSuite. "They were able to really corral the whole city. They did a couple of really nice things for us. With the hotels, they were able to negotiate for us to ensure that all of our room rates would be under \$200 a night, which is really great. If you compare that with New York or even San Francisco, we couldn't come close to that before. Also, because they're tied in with all of the city infrastructure, we had a really great branding presence in downtown San Jose." She noted that the city's street poles were branded with the NetSuite logo and that there were branding opportunities at San Jose International Airport, as well.

She also was pleased with the SJCC expansion and renovation project. "They've really done a great job with that redesign," she states. "We're a company



A corporate function at the San Jose Museum of Art, which can host evening events for up to 3,000 people.

Photo courtesy of San Jose Museum of Art

tering in the Reno-Tahoe area because hotel-casino resorts are in constant competition. He says that hotel rooms are currently experiencing average rates that are 30 percent less than competing destinations, adding that Reno-Tahoe properties have recently invested more than \$500 million, with a large portion of that going toward meetings technology as well as meeting and hotel room renovations and expansions.

Planners working on a qualified meeting can take advantage of RSCVA's "Come See, Fly Free" program to do a site inspection. It includes airfare, premier accommodations, dining, entertainment and recreation. Details are available at www.ComeSeeFlyFree.com. The RSCVA also offers qualified meeting planners a customizable app they can use to keep attendees updated on schedules, speakers and points of interest in the area. A photo album can also be created on the app where attendees can post their own pictures of the event.

The Reno area offers several unique venues, one of which, in particular, is enough to bowl attendees over.

"Because (Team San Jose is) tied in with all of the city infrastructure, we had a really great branding presence in downtown San Jose."

Mini Peiris, V.P Global Marketing
NetSuite, San Mateo, CA

Nicknamed "the Taj Mahal of Tenpins" by the *Los Angeles Times*, the National Bowling Stadium includes 78 bowling lanes and a 172-seat, four-story giant-screen theater. It is also home to the Kingpin Club by Brunswick, an upscale bowling alley and lounge offering 10 VIP bowling lanes that can host teambuilding activities or social events for up to 125 guests.

Charlotte

The tagline for this southern city is "Charlotte's Got a Lot." One thing it's got

a lot of is affordable airlift in and out of Charlotte Douglas International Airport. The city also offers a wide array of hotels within walking distance of the Charlotte Convention Center. The 850,000-sf facility offers 280,000 sf of exhibit space, more than 90,000 sf of flexible meeting space and two spacious ballrooms. The convention center's green initiatives include energy-saving measures, the use of eco-friendly cleaning products, recycling programs and the use of biodegradable cups made from corn products.

The city of Charlotte has teamed up with the Charlotte Convention Center to create a one-of-kind asset, the NASCAR Hall of Fame, which showcases the history of motorsports in the Charlotte region. The Hall of Fame is attached to the convention center, and the city has launched a new "Show Your Badge" program that allows meeting attendees to experience the attraction for a reduced admission fee of \$10. The NASCAR Hall of Fame also serves as a unique special event venue. It offers 40,000 sf of meeting space and can accommodate a dinner for up to 250 or a reception for up to 600 guests.

In April, Southwest Airlines began offering non-stop daily service to Houston's Hobby Airport, Baltimore, Orlando and Chicago's Midway Airport from Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

Minneapolis

Meet Minneapolis, the city's convention and visitors bureau, promotes this Midwestern city as "the perfect blend of natural beauty and urban sophistication." Its outdoor amenities include a chain of lakes, the Mississippi River, and 200 miles of walking, biking and cross country ski trails, all within the city limits.

According to an official from Meet Minneapolis, the city offers a variety of unique experiences, such as the opportunity to kayak the Mississippi River and then watch a Broadway-quality show, all in the same day. When meeting attendees have some downtime, they can rent a bike at one of the city's Nice Ride stations, explore world-renowned art galleries or sample cuisine from James



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Jacksonville's historic Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center, which was once the city's train terminal, features a Grand Lobby with 75-foot ceilings.

Beard-award winners. They'll also likely appreciate the fact that they can enjoy tax-free shopping for apparel and shoes.

Minneapolis has no shortage of crowd-pleasing venues for offsite events. The city's LEED-certified ballpark, Target Field, offers great views of the city and a choice of 10 private event spaces, including the Town Ball Tavern, the Delta SKY360° Legends Club and the Budweiser Roof Deck. The world-renowned Guthrie Theater offers beautiful views of the riverfront and has three different stages and other spaces that can be used for events. The Mill City Museum is an historic building that tells the story of Minneapolis' past. Planners have the option to incorporate the film "Minneapolis in 19 Minutes Flat" and/or the "Flour Tower" display/ride into their events.

Virginia Beach

The Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (VBCVB) touts the city's "perfect balance of coastal charm and big city amenities." Thanks to its central East Coast location, this oceanfront city is within a day's drive of two-thirds of the U.S. population.

The Virginia Beach Convention Center was the first convention center in the country to earn LEED Gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. It offers more than 150,000 sf of column-free exhibit space, nearly 29,000 sf of meeting space and one of the largest ballrooms on the East Coast. Parking at the center is free.

The VBCVB operates a corporate

social responsibility program called "One Beach, One World," which makes it easy for planners to select the best CSR opportunity for their group. These outreach opportunities include environmental initiatives, support for the armed forces, activities that combat homelessness, hunger and domestic violence; and activities that benefit the

"I received so much feedback about how incredibly friendly the people in Oklahoma are, outside of just the convention area."

Lauren Warkentine, Customer Relations-Account Manager
Computer-Rx, Oklahoma City, OK

local community and assist youth and the elderly.

For private offsite events, the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center offers a wide variety of options. Groups can rent the entire aquarium or opt to reserve individual venues that include several pavilions, an IMAX theater, a garden area and deck. For a memorable experience that reflects the local environment, planners can arrange a "Sharks & Sea Turtles" dinner where guests can dine right in front of the tanks and watch the "residents" swim by.

Jacksonville

This northeastern Florida city makes the most of its prime location on the

banks of the St. Johns River with its Riverwalk, the centerpiece of which is The Jacksonville Landing, a venue offering shopping, waterfront dining and year-round entertainment. It has been called "the first place for visitors and the only place for residents."

Visit Jacksonville also reports that the King Street Beer & Food District is an emerging hotspot for nightlife. Visitors to this five-block district have a variety of choices, including gastropubs, locally owned restaurants and craft breweries. The bureau has also launched a special web site, www.only-injax.com, to make it easy for visitors to check out all of the city's dining, entertainment, activities and adventures.

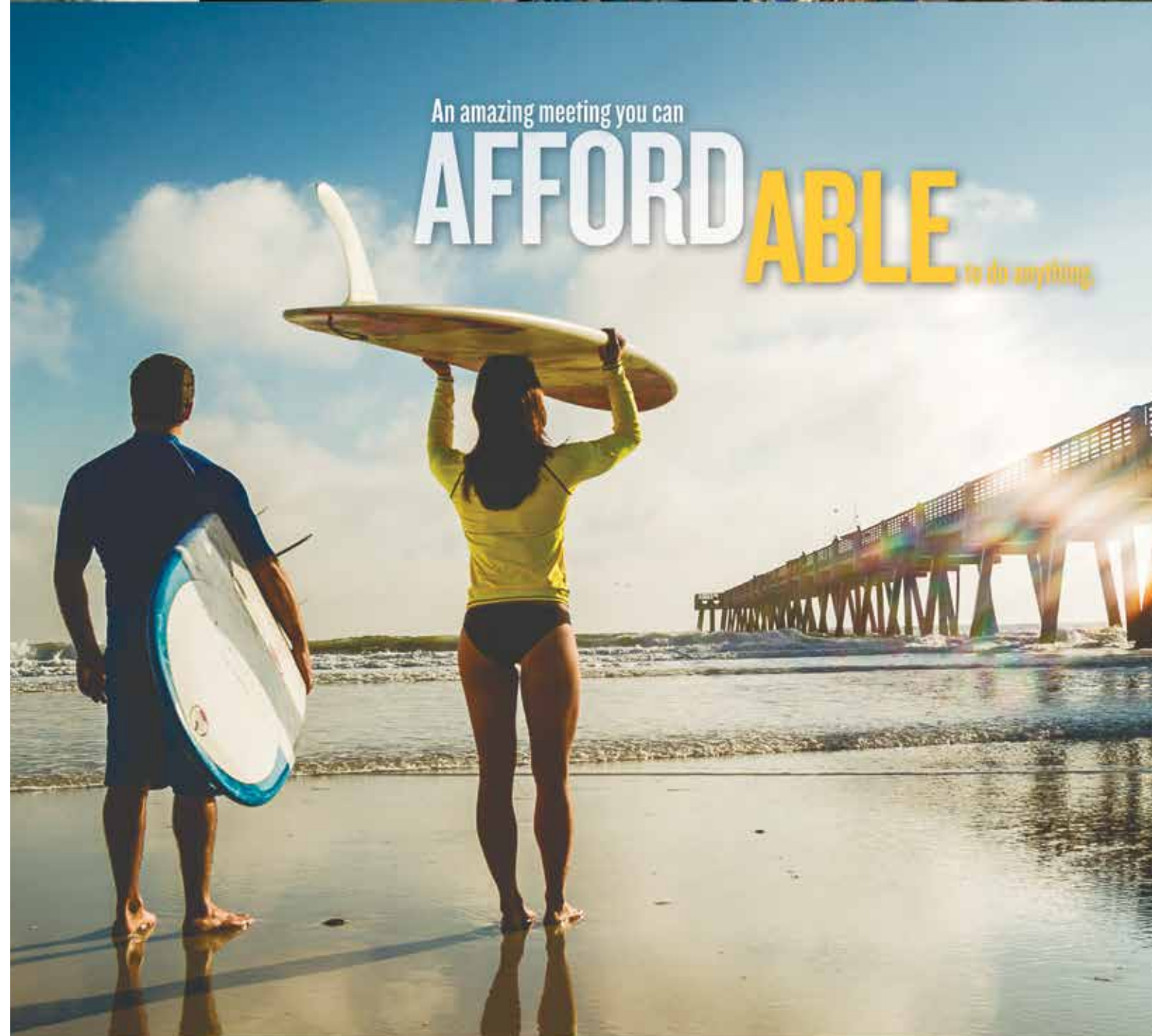
Jacksonville's Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center is not your typical "big box" convention center. This beautiful, historic building once served as the city's train terminal. The 265,000-sf center, which offers 160,000 sf of flexible meeting space, is located minutes from Jacksonville International Airport and less than a mile from more than 1,000 hotel rooms.

For private events, one option is EverBank Field, home of the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars. The 76,000-seat venue is located near the downtown area along the St. Johns River. It features a 30,000-sf tented pavilion that can accommodate up to 500 guests for corporate entertainment.

Worth a Closer Look

Planners who have achieved success in second-tier cities would definitely say they're worth a closer look, due to their good values, range of amenities and ease of access. Brennan offered another advantage. "You get a little bit of the culture of the area and different experiences if you go offsite."

Warkentine found her second-tier success in the nation's heartland. "Oklahoma City has turned out to be a great centralized hot spot for our meeting with the space, hotels and the nightlife in walking distance. 2014 will be the event's third year, so it is still in its infancy. I am excited to see how big it grows with Oklahoma City." **C&IT**



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Orlando

Delivers the Best Bang for the Buck and Great Service to Boot

By John Buchanan

When it comes to well-oiled meeting machinery — from hefty airlift to broad, diverse hotel inventory and world-class entertainment and activities — few destinations can match Orlando. Its unique formula for success has propelled it to the top tier of the meeting and convention market and kept it there for a decade.

More than 55 million visitors flocked to Orlando in the past year, including 3 million meeting and convention attendees, and 2013 is looking as strong or stronger. Major meeting and incentive industry conferences also are flocking to Orlando: For example, this December, Site's Global Conference will be held for the first time in Orlando at Loews Portofino Bay at Universal Orlando; the Destination Marketing Association International's Annual Convention was July 15–17 at The Peabody Orlando. AIBTM, the Americas Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition, announced that it will rotate to Orlando every other year beginning in 2014. The Event Service Professionals Association and Professional Convention

"The No. 1 factor for me is their sensibility when it comes to meetings. They (Orlando) always put their customers first. ... We all work together as a team."



Lori Burke, CMP, President and CEO
LLB Enterprises LLC, Woodbridge, VA

Management Association held their annual meetings in Orlando in January.

"Orlando is widely recognized as the most visited destination in the nation," says George Aguel, president and CEO of



Photo courtesy of Universal Orlando Resort

The Autobot duo in Universal Studios Florida introducing Transformers: The Ride – 3D, the action-packed experience that opened this summer at Universal Orlando Resort.

Visit Orlando, "however, it's important to us that planners are kept up-to-date on the growing appeal of Orlando. By hosting a series of important industry shows in Orlando, we have had the opportunity to showcase the breadth and scope of what our destination has to offer for incentive programs, as well as meetings, conferences and trade shows."

Lori Burke, CMP, president and CEO of independent meeting and event planning company LLB Enterprises LLC, in Woodbridge, VA, has used Orlando for meetings of various sizes and types for the last five years. "In terms of why I like Orlando, the No. 1 factor for me is their sensibility when it comes to meetings," she says. "They always put their customers first, whether that's in pricing or meeting space allocation. And everybody seems to be on the same page when it comes to delivering what I need and want. That's true of the hotels and the CVB. We all work together as a team. And that makes my job easier as a planner."

Especially since the budget-challenging days of the recession, Burke also has consistently found a strong value proposition in Orlando. "I always get a lot of bang for my client's buck," she says. "And in terms of service, they don't just deliver value. But they also take the meeting up a notch."

Mindy Grubb, CMP, director of events at Austin, TX-based real estate enterprise Keller Williams Realty International, is another enthusiastic fan of Orlando. It is now in her regular rotation for the company's largest and most important meeting, its Family Reunion, which draws more than 10,000 attendees.

"The weather is a big factor," says Grubb, who plans more than 100 meetings each year. "But it's also a family destination. And our associates often build their family vacation around the destination where we're having our annual meeting. And Orlando is a prime spot for a family vacation."

Given that key element, because independent contractor realtor attendees pay their own way, she often sees a bump in attendance for Orlando meetings. "We see an increase in our hotel pick-up," she says. "And the higher the attendance, the more successful the meeting is for us."

Bill Burton, vice president of meetings and events at IHG (InterContinental Hotel Group) in Atlanta, used Orlando for his biggest and most important annual meeting last year, a franchisee conference for 6,000 attendees from 28 countries, after not going there since the mid-1990s.

"All of the work that has been done there over the last five to eight years, with the enhancements to the convention center, the renovation and expansion of The Peabody and the addition of new hotels around the convention center, made it a good choice for us," Burton says.

Airlift

Although Orlando offers a formidable list of attractive attributes, perhaps none is more important than its almost unparalleled airlift that is the result of its perennial status as the world's top family vacation destination.

"The biggest thing for us about Orlando is the ease of getting there," says Ellen Boyer, conference and tradeshow director at educational publisher Professional Media Group, headquartered in Norwalk, CT. "Traveling to Orlando from almost anywhere in the country is either a nonstop flight or a single connection flight. So it's a very easy place to get to."

As a result of that benefit, Boyer has used Orlando regularly for the company's two most important annual meetings, ranging from 125 to 1,200 attendees from all 50 states, for a decade.

Grubb also cites Orlando's airlift as a key factor in her loyalty. The simple fact that her attendees, also from all 50 states, can generally get direct flights at reasonable fares is something that clearly sets Orlando apart, she says.

Hotel Inventory

In addition to offering planners and attendees easy air access, Orlando also offers an extraordinary range of high-quality rooms across a wide spectrum of price points — again as a result of its unique tourism status.

"They have a wide variety of properties that can accommodate the sizes and types of meetings that I do," Burke says.

She particularly likes the trio of locally owned Rosen prop-

erties: Rosen Shingle Creek, Rosen Plaza Hotel and Rosen Centre Hotel. "I like doing business with them because they are honest people," Burke says. "I also like the quality of those hotels and the price points. The food and beverage is also very high quality. I also know (owner) Mr. Rosen, and when my groups arrive, he is there to greet them. It's almost like you're part of the family."

Other Orlando hotels Burke favors include The Peabody Orlando, Orlando World Center Marriott Resort & Convention Center and Caribe Royale Orlando.



Ellen Boyer, Conference and Tradeshow Director
Professional Media Group, Norwalk, CT

"The biggest thing...about Orlando is the ease of getting there. Traveling to Orlando from almost anywhere...is either a nonstop flight or a single connection flight."

In his role as meeting planner for a major hotel company, Burton has a particularly detailed appreciation for product in any destination. "There are really good hotels in Orlando these days," he says. "And there is a great variety, in terms of price, throughout the greater Orlando area. So because there is so much different inventory at different price points, that makes it a really good location for a meeting. And because I'm in the hotel business, I pay particular attention to those kinds of things."

For his meeting last year, Burton used IHG's own hotels, including Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal, Holiday Inn Downtown Disney and St. Regis Walt Disney World, in addition to The Peabody Orlando, Hilton Orlando, DoubleTree by Hilton, Rosen Plaza, Rosen Centre and properties along the International Drive convention corridor.

Of particular importance to Grubb is hotels within easy walking distance of the local convention center. "And that is another advantage of Orlando," she says. "It has major hotels close to the convention center, so that helps us reduce transportation costs and makes things easy for attendees."

Yet another consideration for Grubb is the range of hotel rates in Orlando. That's important because her attendees pay their own costs of attending the conference and often bring their families for a vacation.

From a planner's perspective, Grubb also has high praise for the service she gets from local hotels. "They have been wonderful partners for us," she says. "For example, they have created specialty drinks at the bars for us. They've really tailored what they have to offer to our event. For example, the Rosen Centre was willing to create a 'Club KW' venue for us during the meeting."

Boyer is another planner with the keen appreciation of the

range of hotel options in Orlando. The list of properties she favors, based on experience, are the Hilton, Located in the Walt Disney World Resort; Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress; The Ritz-Carlton, Orlando, Grande Lakes; Waldorf Astoria Orlando and Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate.

For her most recent meeting in June, which drew 1,000 attendees, she used the highly acclaimed Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel.

"It ranked right up there as one of the best hotels we've ever used," Boyer says. "The staff is very easy to work with. And all of the various departments are very well integrated. So that meant if I had any kind of issue, whether I needed tables moved or lights turned off or on, I could call anybody, and they would know who to contact to immediately to take care of what I needed — no matter what the issue was. They are just very on top of everything." Boyer also gave high marks to the Swan and Dolphin's state-of-the-art meeting space.

New and Renovated

Burke points out that another factor in Orlando's favor is that she likes the fact that the city's hotel product is so well maintained. "The hotels are very well taken care of," she says. "And I think that just shows the culture of the hospitality industry there. They're always striving to keep things up to par and always looking for ways to make things better. And that's one of the reasons why planners keep coming back."

The big hotel opening on the horizon is the \$360 million Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort, which is scheduled to debut in 2014. The 444-room hotel will feature 37,000 sf of function and meeting space, including a 14,000-sf main ballroom and a 6,000-sf junior ballroom.

The Hilton Orlando has broken ground on a \$2.1 million expansion project that will add a 50,000-sf Promenade outdoor space that can accommodate up to 3,000 attendees. The 1,417-room hotel is connected to the Orange County Convention center by an elevated pedestrian bridge.

The 1,500-acre luxury Villas of Grand Cypress Resort recently completed the first phase of a resort-wide renovation that included all 146 villas.

The newly named Wyndham Orlando Resort, will complete a renovation of its lobby and 613 guest rooms and suites by the end of this year.

Rosen Hotels and Resorts' convention hotels now offer free wired and wireless Internet in all guest rooms and public areas. Rosen Centre Hotel recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of all 1,334 guest rooms as well as the presidential and hospitality suites. Rosen Centre's 124,000 sf of meeting space includes a new 18,000-sf Executive Ballroom. Rosen Plaza Hotel recently completed a floor-to-ceiling renovation of all 800 guest rooms as well as hallways and hospitality suites. Rosen Shingle Creek's mega-sized 445,000 sf of meeting space includes 66,000 sf of outdoor space, thanks to a recent 16,000-sf expansion.

The 720-room, four-diamond Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate earlier this year opened the 48,000-sf Osceola County Conference Center. With a 28,800-sf ballroom and accompanying indoor meeting space, the new conference center gives the Omni a total of 128,000 sf of indoor event space and an additional 70,000 sf of outdoor space.

Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando completed a \$14 million renovation of all 750 guest rooms in April. Renovations to the meeting space and ballrooms at Universal Orlando's Loews Royal Pacific and Hard Rock hotels were finished last September. Guest room renovations at Loews Royal Pacific will be completed in stages with the first half scheduled for a 2014 and the rest in 2015.

The 2,000-room Orlando World Center Marriott has just completed its five-year, multimillion-dollar renovation project. The North Tower's 514 guest rooms, including 10 suites, have been refurbished, as well as another 110 guest suites, the Hall of Cities meeting rooms and Falls Pool Oasis.

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Dining and Entertainment

One of the most dramatic enhancements of Orlando over the last few years has been the rapid and well-planned development of its local dining scene, particularly along the International Drive convention corridor and adjacent to major theme parks Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando.

"I rate the dining scene in Orlando very highly," Boyer says. "It plays a very strong role in the success of our meetings. For example, sometimes attendees bring family members, and there are just a lot of good dining options in Orlando. And for our high-end meetings, the sponsors often take attendees out for dinner. And Orlando also offers a lot of good options for that kind of entertaining."

Grubb also notes the dining scene as a key factor in Orlando's attraction for her and her attendees. "A lot of our leadership staff take guests and potential recruits out for dinner," she says. "So the quality of the dining scene is a very big part of the appeal of Orlando for us."

For example, she says, The Pointe Orlando complex near the convention center offers a diverse range of restaurants, from a B.B. King's Blues Club to Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar to The Capital Grille, that can be used for a dine-around program under one roof.



"They are also the easiest convention center to work with. ... You can ask them for absolutely anything, and they will deliver it with no questions asked. They are just amazing to work with."

Mindy Grubb, CMP, Director of Events
Keller Williams Realty International, Austin, TX

Visit Orlando points out that over the past five years, the city has doubled or tripled the number of high-end culinary experiences available.

Convention Center

Yet another of the competitive advantages Orlando can claim is the mega-facility complex that is the Orange County Convention Center, one of the largest and most technologically modern in the country. In addition to its physical capabilities, it is also known for its exemplary service.

"We use a lot of space — more than a million square feet," Grubb says. "And there are only a handful of cities, including Orlando, that have the amount of space we need. But they are also the easiest convention center to work with I have ever experienced. You can ask them for absolutely anything, and they will deliver it with no questions asked. And the food-and-beverage service they have down to a tee. They are just amazing to work with. It's a well-oiled machine."

The state-of-the-art technology upgrades of the last few years are also very important to Grubb. "That saves us tons of money on the front end," she says.

Burton also gives the convention center an A grade. "It worked great for us," he says. "It's very clean. It's very well maintained. The day-to-day management of the facility is really good. And they really pay attention to their ongoing maintenance, and they always look for new opportunities to improve things further going forward. They do a really great job there, whether that's management or housekeeping. And the facility has a really good feel to it."

He also praised the food and beverage services. "They did a fantastic job," he says. "It was one of the best convention center food experiences I have ever had. And they go out of their way to source local ingredients. For example, they used a lot of fresh local produce in the food we were served. And that's always a good thing."

CVB Support

The final weapon in Orlando's competitive arsenal is its frequently praised convention and visitors bureau, Visit Orlando. Over the past five years, it has developed a reputation as one of the best organizations in the meeting industry.

"We depend on them for everything they can possibly do for us," Grubb says. "They are amazing. They create our micro websites. They help us with attendees who are planning a family vacation. They recommend things for our attendees to do. We also link to their website so attendees can do their own research.

They also help us with the marketing of our meeting. For example, when we host our other annual meeting in Austin, a mid-year event, they send a team to promote the next conference in Orlando."

Boyer also works very closely — and very successfully — with Visit Orlando. "And for the last five years, we've worked with a dedicated staff member named Collette Johnson, who is just fantastic," she says. "She vets and manages RFPs for me and helps with hotel selection. She also drives me around when I'm there for a site visit." Boyer finds such dedicated, personalized support to be a relatively unique benefit. "It's extremely unusual," she says. "With most CVBs, you just get the luck of the draw, depending on who is busy. So having a dedicated individual to work with for all of my meetings is a very big benefit. And my relationship with Collette and the job she does for us is one of the main reasons we go back to Orlando."

But another big reason why Boyer, Grubb and many other planners use Orlando on a regular basis, with great success, is that it consistently delivers what is almost universally considered the most important benefit in a post-recession industry: bottom-line value.

"These days, every meeting planner is very budget conscious," Grubb says. "And Orlando is one of the least expensive cities we have ever done business in. But we also get a lot of bang for our buck every time we do an event in Orlando." **C&IT**



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WATERS

Interstate Hotels & Resorts has named **Leigh Ann Waters** as corporate regional director, sales and marketing for Atlanta and surrounding area. She formerly served as Georgia Chapter president of Meeting Professionals International.

The Hyatt Regency Century Plaza, Los Angeles, CA, has named **Brian Morris** as director of sales and marketing. He was most recently director of sales and marketing at Hyatt Regency St. Louis at the Arch, St. Louis, MO.



MORRIS

Fontainebleau Miami Beach has named **Felix Llibre** as director of national accounts. He most recently served as senior account executive at Marriott Global Sales Organization in Miami, FL.

Laura Reed was named sales manager for The Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club, Naples, FL, responsible for small groups and the Southwest Florida market. She is a recent graduate of the Florida Gulf Coast University, with a degree in Resort & Hospitality Management.



REED



WASHKO

John Washko was named V.P. of group marketing and sales for Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas. He most recently served as V.P. sales and marketing for Elite Meetings International. He first joined Atlantis in 1995, serving as executive director of group sales until 2002.

The Anaheim/Orange County Visitor & Convention Bureau, Anaheim, CA, has promoted **Collee Cornett** to director of meeting solutions. She was the AOCVCB's director of convention housing. **C&IT**



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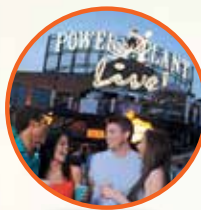
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