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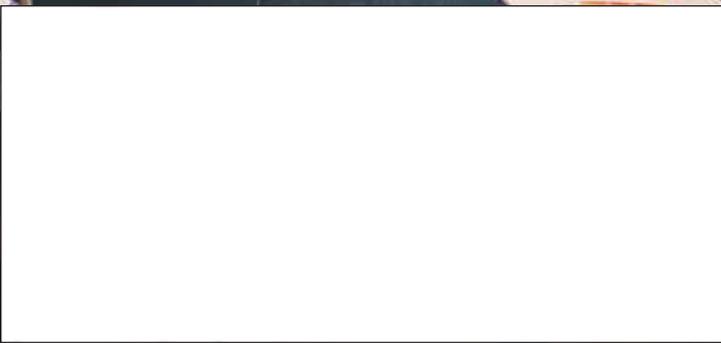


Photo courtesy of Lansdowne Resort

The Amphitheatre at the IACC-certified Lansdowne Resort near Washington, DC.

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THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2013 Vol. 20 No. 5



Photo courtesy of Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort

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Four award-winning golf clubs and courses at Florida's Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort allow for all levels of play for memorable golf events.

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The meetings complex of the Sands Expo and the Congress Center at The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas.



Photo courtesy of Las Vegas Sands Corp.

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Publisher's Message

Getting the Most Out of Meetings

What shape table works best for your meetings? Round? U-shaped? Square? What's the best? Meeting planners and event producers continue to ponder this question, which depends on factors such as group size, the meeting goals, availability and more. Take, for example, the recent advisory council meeting hosted by Lynette Owens, president of meeting and incentive management

firm Lynette Owens & Associates. For the past 20 years, Lynette has assembled top insurance industry executives to discuss the industry's key issues. For the council's summer 2013 meeting, the group met around a horseshoe-shaped table at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic. (See "Meeting of the Minds" on page 10 in this issue.) This arrangement resulted in lively face-to-face discussion and, as participant Peter Konrad said, "We were designed for relationships, to have a connection," and added, "The more people rely on technology, the more people realize the need for connections."



For the most effective connections and productive events, insurance and financial meeting professionals often seek an IACC-certified conference center for good reasons. As IACC CEO Mark Cooper explained, "Being a conference center is more a philosophy and a culture than it is about physicality and size of the meeting space," he said in our cover story on conference centers on page 14. "Conference centers focus all of their energy on providing highly productive meeting environments, and all of their resources go into those areas rather than lots of other areas."

Brian Brown, CMP, an event planner for Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, uses conference centers because meetings are their specialty. "They are extremely meeting-focused from the way they have been built to their staffs to the equipment they have and pricing structure. It's easier to learn and concentrate on the training we provide. And we save about 15 percent on meetings. The ROI is tremendous in terms of what we invest in training people to sell our products to the public," related Brown.

Finally, on page 21 we salute the best of the best — the hotels, resorts and convention and visitors bureaus that you selected as winners of the 2013 World Class Award.

Harvey Grotsky

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A COASTAL COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION PUBLICATION

PUBLISHER/EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
 Harvey Grotsky
 cccpublisher@att.net

GROUP PUBLISHER
 Arthur Hyman
 ccgroupublisher@att.net

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
 Mitch D. Miller
 cccartdirector@att.net

MANAGING EDITORS
 Susan W. Fell
 ccceditor1@att.net

Susan S. Gregg
 ccceditor2@att.net

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
 Michael Bassett
 Karen Brost
 John Buchanan
 Timothy Herrick
 Stella Johnson
 Derek Reveron
 Patrick Simms

PRESIDENT & CEO
 Harvey Grotsky

VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS
 David A. Middlebrook
 cccoperations@att.net

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES
 2700 N. Military Trail, Suite 120
 Boca Raton, FL 33431-6394
 561-989-0600 Fax: 561-989-9509

NORTHEAST
 Jeffrey Posner
 516-594-2820 · Fax: 516-594-2826
 prijef@aol.com

FLORIDA/CARIBBEAN
 Arthur Hyman
 561-989-0600, ext. 108 · Fax: 561-989-9509
 ccgroupublisher@att.net

SOUTHWEST
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 · Fax: 561-989-9509
 cccadvertising@att.net

SOUTHEAST
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 · Fax: 561-989-9509
 cccadvertising@att.net

LOUISIANA
 Arthur Hyman
 561-989-0600, ext. 108 · Fax: 561-989-9509
 ccgroupublisher@att.net

MIDWEST
 561-989-0600, ext. 114 · Fax: 561-989-9509
 cccadvertising@att.net

WEST
 Marshall Rubin
 818-888-2407 · Fax: 818-888-4907
 mrubin@westworld.com

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What ideas will CAMBRIDGE inspire at your meeting?

The Westin Orlando Universal Boulevard Expands Meeting Space



The Westin Orlando Universal Boulevard.

ORLANDO, FL — The Westin Orlando Universal Boulevard celebrated the groundbreaking of its new meeting and special event center, which will expand the AAA Four Diamond hotel's meeting space by an additional 5,576 sf (including prefunction space). The new meeting and event center will expand the hotel's capacity to accommodate corporate and association group meetings, as well as their ability to host banquets and special events for groups up to 370 attendees for banquet settings and 330 for meetings. With a total of 13,685 sf of meeting space, the hotel will be able to accommodate the mid-sized meeting and special event market in a luxury setting. The expected opening date is February, 2014. www.westinorlandouniversal.com

Sandals Set to Build New Beaches Resort in Barbados

MONTEGO BAY, JAMAICA — Sandals Resorts International recently announced that it was in "exciting discussions" with the Barbados government to build a brand new Beaches resort on the site of the former Almond Beach Village in St. Peter, Barbados. "While an agreement is yet to be finalized, commitments have been made on both sides, and we are thrilled at the possibility of bringing the award-winning Beaches brand to this wonderful country," said a spokesperson for Sandals Resorts International in a statement. "We are a Caribbean company and firmly believe that no one understands the needs of the region or its people like we do." Sandals Resorts International's three all-inclusive resorts in the area are Beaches Turks and Caicos and Beaches Negril and Beaches Ocho Rios in Jamaica. www.beaches.com, www.sandals.com

Paradisus Palma Real to Debut New Convention Center in December

Paradisus Palma Real, an all-inclusive resort in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, announced that its new convention center is scheduled to debut December 1, 2013. The nearly 18,000-sf center boasting high ceilings includes multi-functional and flexible space, and the latest in technology and audio-visual equipment. John Iannini, senior director of sales, meetings and events for Melia Hotels International, said, "Conference planners have asked us for larger, more flexible space, high unobstructed ceilings, and high-tech audio-visual offerings. Our new partnership with AAVC allows our customers to tap into an in-house vendor that has all of those capabilities without having to ship equipment or talent to the island." The facility will house an "Experience Lounge" — where the events and production team can showcase 3-D site visits of the new convention center, complete with customer branding and set design. Paradisus Palma Real also employed Earth Check as the partner for its new Green Meeting Program. The resort's meetings manager has been Earth Check Certified and taken on the role of "Green Meeting Custodian," ensuring all green meeting attributes are being adhered to such as managing electrical power use efficiently; implementing reduce-reuse-recycle programs for the facility's consumables and waste; keeping CO₂ emissions from auxiliary equipment within regulated levels; preference for nationally produced consumables and local service suppliers; reducing printed materials and more. www.melia.com



Photo credits: 1-6, Lynette Owens & Associates and Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana, 7, Barbara L. Sullivan, 8, Christies Photographic

Photos 1-6: Meeting and incentive management firm Lynette Owens & Associates hosted their 21st Annual Insurance Advisory Council meeting in August at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana and Casa De Campo, Dominican Republic (see full story on page 10). Attendees and guests included: **1** (l to r) Garrett Konrad, COO, Integrated Financial Concepts, Auburn, CA; Danelle Konrad; Melina Grassi; Debbie Grassi, Western regional director of sales, Lynette Owens & Associates. **2** Lynette Owens, president of Lynette Owens & Associates (second from left) enjoys the farewell dinner with Advisory Council attendees at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana. **3** Neil Higger, president, Academic Financial, Fountain Valley, CA; Elaine Kavanaugh. **4** Brenda Krupa; Dave Krupa, assistant vice president, Baltimore Life Insurance Company, Owings Mills, MD. **5** Ann Ledford; Ed Ledford, principal, business development, FFP Insurance Services Inc., Carmel, IN. **6** (l to r) Eddie Ledford Jr.; Robert Taveras, Amstar DMC, Punta Cana, Dominican Republic; Mark Jordan, Amstar DMC. **7** The exhibit floor at Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International's MEET National 2013 at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center September 4-5. **8** Attendees at the International Special Events Society's ISES Live 2013 gala dinner at Atlantis, Paradise Island, Nassau, Bahamas, were greeted by a human statue depicting Poseidon, god of the sea, who ruled over the mythical island of Atlantis.

The Langham, Chicago Opens



The Langham, Chicago.

CHICAGO, IL — The Langham, Chicago, a luxury hotel, is now open in the Windy City. Housed within a 52-story Chicago landmark — the last skyscraper designed by renowned architect Mies van der Rohe — the property is just steps from The Magnificent Mile, Millennium Park, Chicago Cultural Centre, and other dining, shopping and cultural attractions. The Langham's 316 guest rooms and 48 suites feature complimentary Wi-Fi and 55-inch LCD televisions. Also new are Travelle restaurant and lounge, and Tiffin at The Langham, the brand's signature afternoon tea that originated at The Langham, London. The property's 15,000 sf of meeting space includes 12 function rooms, ranging from the Devonshire Ballroom to four boardrooms. www.chicago.langhamhotels.com

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Sands Expo Complex Las Vegas Reaches Green Milestone

LAS VEGAS, NV — The meetings complex of Sands Expo and the Congress Center at The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas was recognized as the first venue in the world to achieve the advanced "Level Two" industry certification for environmentally sustainable meetings, events, trade shows and conferences. Level Two Certification to the ASTM Standard is a designation of the industry's comprehensive standards for environmentally sustainable meetings, which was developed in partnership by the Convention Industry Council's APEX initiative and ASTM International.

"Currently, there are only four venues in the world that are even certified at Level One," said John Caparella, president and COO of The Venetian, The Palazzo and Sands Expo. "We are beyond thrilled to be a leader in the industry in being the first venue to become certified at Level Two."

Previous sustainability certifications earned include LEED Gold Certification for Existing Buildings (The Venetian and Sands Expo), LEED Silver Certification for New Construction (The Palazzo), and TripAdvisor GreenLeader Gold Certification (The Venetian and The Palazzo). www.gmicglobal.org, www.venetianpalazzomeetings.com



Sands Expo and the Congress Center at The Venetian and The Palazzo Las Vegas.

Marriott Marquis Coming to McCormick Place in 2016

CHICAGO, IL — Chicago's Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority board approved a 1,200-room convention hotel to be built just west of McCormick Place, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. Slated to open in 2016, the \$400 million hotel will be a Marriott Marquis, Marriott's premium convention center brand. Hilton Worldwide and Hyatt Hotels also competed for the contract. The entire construction project, to be managed by Jones Lang LaSalle Americas Inc., is slated to include an arena and a boutique hotel, and an entertainment district. www.marriott.com

Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village Offers Exclusive Buyout

WESTLAKE, CA — Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village, located north of Malibu in the heart of the Los Angeles' Conejo Valley, announces a full buyout incentive for groups. Meeting planners with 125 guest rooms or more on peak can enjoy complete, exclusive access to the Southern California hotel's 11 acres. The 270-room hotel will offer buyout groups full range to utilize the hotel's 48,000 sf of flexible, indoor meeting space, and more than 125,000 sf of outdoor space. The AAA Five Diamond hotel boasts an award-winning 40,000-sf spa, resort-style amenities and spacious, luxuriously appointed guest rooms. www.fourseasons.com/westlakevillage

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Meeting of the Minds

Lynette Owens & Associates Insurance Advisory Council Enters Its 21st Year

By Karen Brost

For more than 20 years, Lynette Owens, president of meeting and incentive management firm Lynette Owens & Associates (LOA), has been gathering together top execs in the insurance industry for a biannual advisory council meeting to discuss some of the industry's key issues.

For the 21st Annual LOA Insurance Advisory Council meeting in August, the group was hosted by the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic. The expansive, all-inclusive beachfront resort includes 1,787 rooms, a 65,500-sf convention center, nine restaurants, 19 bars and lounges, 12 pools, a casino, spa, Jack Nicklaus golf course and Oro, the top nightclub in the Dominican Republic. Every room is a suite that includes a double jacuzzi, mini bar, premium liquor dispenser and 24-hour room service, so guests can truly feel like they are getting rock star treatment. Even calls back home to the U.S. and Canada are included.

Destination Decisions

Meeting in a Hard Rock conference room designed for "taking care of business," the advisory council addressed a series of topics relating to current trends and the future of meet-



The Lynette Owens Advisory Council posed for a group shot in front of the Church of St. Stanislaus in Altos de Chavón, a replica of a 16th century Mediterranean village in the resort area of La Romana, Dominican Republic.

ings. The group was first asked which destinations they felt were the most motivational hotspots.

Ed Ledford, principal, business development for FFP Insurance Services Inc., said it really depends on the audience. For example, high-end producers may prefer an exotic destination

with a program that includes strong educational content to make the trip worth their time. On the other hand, people from smaller "mom and pop" firms often prefer to go somewhere they haven't been before. He cautioned, though, that depending on the destination, some of them may not be

able to afford to do activities outside the resort. That's why, he said, he's a big fan of all-inclusive resorts to ensure a good overall experience.

Owens commented that companies also can help defray attendees' additional expenses by distributing a set amount of cash to them when they arrive at the destination. She advised against sending it out in advance, however, since many attendees will be tempted to use it to pay bills.

Dave Krupa, assistant vice president for Baltimore Life Insurance Company, offered a simple formula for selecting a motivational destination: "Fun, sun and alcohol." He also favors all-inclusive resorts and including planned excursions.

Edward A. Carroll, LLIF, president and CEO of the consulting firm Ed Carroll and Associates, specializes in the fraternal insurance industry. He said that cruises are extremely popular with this segment. He noted, "Just say 'cruise' and they'll say when?" He added that cruises to Puerto Rico and Alaska have been popular with this group.

Neil Higger, president of Academic Financial, brought up the point that seasickness may prevent some people from enjoying a cruise. "An all-inclusive is like a cruise that doesn't go anywhere," he noted. "No one gets sick."

Debbie Grassi, Western regional director of sales for LOA, commented that connectivity is another important factor to consider when choosing a destination, as attendees are not likely to be very happy if poor cell service or the lack of Wi-Fi connections pre-

vent them from staying in touch with their family or business back home. On the topic of communications, Garrett Konrad, chief operating officer of Integrated Financial Concepts, also noted that choosing a destination that's English-friendly makes it easier for attendees to enjoy the experience.

Ann Rogers, corporate secretary for State Mutual Insurance Company in Rome, GA, said that safety is a key consideration when choosing a destination, a point that was echoed by many of the other participants. Garrett Konrad also discussed the idea of "perceived safety," noting that some attendees may prefer one destination over another because they think it's safer, even though statistics may not bear that out. An example was given of a program that a company moved from Cancun to another international destination because of safety concerns, when crime statistics were actually higher in the new destination chosen.

One topic of concern that many of the executives brought up involved the travel times required to participate in a program. They said that many attendees are simply not willing to take the long flights required to get to a distant destination like Europe, for example. "The convenience for spouses is (another) factor," Higger noted. "It can't take too long to get there." For many attendees, long travel times are more than a matter of inconvenience. "You can't take them out of the office too long if they're trying to build their business," stated Tyler Carr, regional vice president, Florida, for First Annuity Insurance Marketing.

Insurance Advisory Council Attendees

Heath Bowen
Chief Marketing Officer
Allegis Advisor Group, Salt Lake City, UT

Tyler Carr
Regional Vice President - Florida
First Annuity Insurance Marketing, Ft. Myers, FL

Edward A. Carroll, LLIF
President, CEO
Ed Carroll and Associates, Woodworth, LA

Ira Gottshall
President & CEO
FFP Insurance Services Inc., Valencia, CA

Neil Higger
President
Academic Financial, Fountain Valley, CA

Garrett Konrad
Chief Operating Officer
Integrated Financial Concepts, Auburn, CA

Peter Konrad
President
Integrated Financial Concepts, Auburn, CA

Dave Krupa
Assistant Vice President
Baltimore Life Insurance Company, Owings Mills, MD

Ed Ledford
Principal, Business Development
FFP Insurance Services Inc., Carmel, IN

Ann Rogers
Corporate Secretary
State Mutual Insurance Company, Rome, GA

Bruce Seymour
Senior Vice President
Wells Fargo Advisors LLC, Los Angeles, CA



Lynette Owens



Heath Bowen



Tyler Carr



Edward A. Carroll



Dave Krupa



Ed Ledford



Ann Rogers



C&IT Contributing Editor Karen Brost (far left) participated in the Advisory Council meeting at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana.

Ledford brought up another point related to incentive trips. “Incentives provide recognition and great relationship-building opportunities. They’re part of a package the agent is looking for when establishing a relationship with a carrier or FMO (Field Marketing Organization). Quality product, superior service and appropriate compensation will more determine which carriers/FMOs the agent works with. The incentive component can be the glue that holds it together. Gone are the days when an agent would write a particular product based on the incentive trip.”

Generational Differences

Given today’s multi-generational workplace, the days of planning an incentive trip where all of the attendees are generally the same age are long gone. That presents some additional challenges when choosing both the destination and the array of activities that will be offered.

Heath Bowen, chief marketing officer for Allegis Advisor Group, explained that the top five producers in his company are under the age of 35. He said that some people, typically the older attendees, go on trips for the social interaction, while others are thrill-seekers who are more interested in experiencing what the destination has to offer. These individuals, one executive noted, are more likely to prefer activities that are “off the beaten path.”

Peter Konrad, president of Integrated Financial Concepts, believes in offering a menu of activities much like a company would offer a series of breakout sessions, so attendees can choose what appeals to them.

The group indicated that in addition to more active excursions, traditional activities such as relaxing by the pool or on the beach, golf, spa and shopping continue to be popular as well as non-traditional activities such as cooking and winemaking classes and wellness programs.

Regardless of the activities offered, Krupa said it’s still important to provide opportunities for the whole group to be together because of the valuable opportunities that creates for education and mentoring.

Corporate Social Responsibility

When the executives were asked if they incorporate CSR activities into their programs, the response was mixed. Some companies do and others don’t, but the companies that do find a way to give back to the local community during their meetings were pleased with the results. “It feels good to help, and it’s good for business,” explained Ira Gottshall, president and CEO of FFP Insurance Services Inc. He noted that his company offers these opportunities on a volunteer-only basis, but that about 90 percent of the attendees generally participate. Some of the other executives were considering adding a CSR element to their programs.

Individual Travel Awards

If there was one point on which the group was unanimous, it was that individual travel awards have no place in their business. “There’s no point,” Higger said. Carr added that it would eliminate key opportunities for attendees to build relationships

and make connections. “Agents like to network,” he stated.

Carroll pointed out that the value of group trips extends beyond the agents themselves, noting that families often become friends and look forward to seeing each other from year to year. He said this becomes an additional motivating factor for agents to keep earning the trips.

The Future of Meetings

Carroll noted that he has seen tremendous changes in meetings in recent years and predicts more changes are coming in the next 10 years. Owens reported that she is seeing far fewer regional meetings in the insurance industry than in years past.

The executives were in agreement that their companies need to embrace the use of technology for some meetings, but that there will always be a place for face-to-face meetings. “We were designed for relationships, to have a connection,” Peter Konrad stated. “The more people rely on technology, the more people realize the need for connections.”

Bowen is a big believer in using technology to conduct activities such as training. But, he said, “You cannot network with somebody over a computer, even if you have HD. You can’t ignite a fire in them that way.”

“Relationships make the virtual meetings possible,” Gottshall noted. Bowen commented that the cost savings achieved by holding some meetings via teleconference can be used to create better face-to-face meetings.

What About Golf?

The game of golf has a long tradi-

tion of providing lucrative networking opportunities in the insurance and financial services industries, so the executives were asked if golf is still as important as it once was. One executive stated that having the opportunity to play golf at a high-profile course such as Pelican Hill is still a draw for many individuals. Another commented that there are fewer young people playing golf now, so he feels that golf is less important and that teambuilding activities now have a higher value.

Krupa commented that nearly half of his field managers are female, and they’re asking, “Why are we always golfing?” On the subject of activities that are more female-oriented, Owens and Grassi described a unique meeting they participated in where the women were treated to nail services in a spa. The content of the meeting was presented to them while they were a “captivate audience” having their nails done.

Exploring the Options

In addition to experiencing the all-inclusive amenities of the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana, advisory council members received a presentation from Suzanne Moore, CMP, senior sales manager for the Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate. Describing the property as being “near the attractions without the distraction,” she gave an overview of the 1,200-acre resort, which includes 720 newly renovated guest rooms, two Greg Norman golf courses, a golf academy and spa.

The group also learned more about what the Dominican Republic has to offer through a presentation by Mark Jordan and Robert Traveras of Amstar, the destination management company that partners with the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana. The company also has operations in Mexico and Jamaica.

Amstar representatives say they can handle groups of from 20 to 3,000 people, and one of the first services they can offer is expedited processing through customs. Visitors to the DR are required to purchase a \$10 Tourist Card upon arrival, and Amstar can pre-order

these cards so attendees don’t have to wait in that line. Amstar also offers airport transfers, including handicapped-accessible vans and VIP vehicles, and the representatives described a wide variety of tours that are available. These include catamaran snorkeling trips, tours of communities to interact with local residents, shopping excursions and CSR activities. They also can arrange for high-end lobster and champagne cruises, a spa cruise, speed boating and opportunities for attendees to test their skills on the largest zip lines in the Caribbean.

Amstar’s representatives also discussed how a new highway currently under construction will soon expedite travel between the airport, Santo Domingo and the island’s resort areas of Punta Cana and La Romana. The new highway is expected to be completed later this year.

Creative Punta Cana, the in-house décor company for the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana, met with the group to describe some of the items they offer, including giant guitars and other rock décor, “chill out” lounge furniture, sand sculptures and Caribbean, pirate, and Thai-themed parties. As they say, “Anything can happen with budget and time.” One unique item the company offers is a “paparazzi wall,” a mural featuring a lineup of paparazzi ready to “greet” attendees as they arrive at an event, complete with flashes popping. The hotel’s in-house AV company, J&A Audio Visual, provides staging, lasers, lighting, concert productions, gobos and LED dance floors.

The All-Inclusive Option

Since the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Punta Cana is an all-inclusive resort, groups do not incur additional setup charges for private events unless they take place on the beach. Food and beverage charges are included in the all-inclusive rate, and the only other charges groups would incur onsite would be for items such as décor, AV or amenities such as golf and spa services.

“The all-inclusive destinations are such a good value, and there aren’t

that many,” Owens comments. “When you narrow it down, you’ve got Mexico and some in the Caribbean. For an all-inclusive destination, I have to say that Punta Cana is equally as nice as Mexico. The Hard Rock did such a nice job for us. It’s especially ideal for large groups. When you’re taking 900 people somewhere like that, you really have to look at the whole budget, air included, and it really is a very good value. They’re now transitioning the property in Riviera Maya (Mexico), which used to be the Aventura Spa Palace, into a Hard Rock, so that’s in the works now. I’m sure that will be just as pretty.”

After the meetings wrapped up, Amstar treated the advisory board members to a half-day Marinarium Excursions sightseeing catamaran cruise. The outing offered participants a chance to snorkel with stingrays and nurse sharks, and cruise along the island’s turquoise waters and palm tree-fringed coastline while enjoying island music played by a local disc jockey.

At the conclusion of the advisory council’s activities at the Hard Rock, a number of the members traveled to nearby La Romana to experience Casa de Campo, another all-inclusive resort. This 7,000-acre luxury retreat, which offers private villas and hotel accommodations, is dedicated to the sporting life and features three Pete Dye-designed golf courses, tennis, polo, horseback riding, water sports and a 245-acre shooting facility. “Everything was flawless,” Owens describes. “It’s also an amazing destination for incentives and meetings.”

Lynette Owens & Associates also represents these properties to the insurance market: Colonial Williamsburg Resorts in Virginia, Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort in Pennsylvania, and three properties in Florida: Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate, Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort and PGA National Resort & Spa.

The next Advisory Council meeting is November 3–9, 2013 at Adare Manor near Limerick City, Ireland, and the K Club near Dublin. **I&FMM**

More photos on page 7.

Conference Centers

Why Their Focus on Providing Highly Productive Meeting Environments Is Great for Planners

By Derek Reveron

Photo courtesy of Keystone Resort

A view of Keystone Lake and the Rocky Mountains from the Keystone Resort & Conference Center, Keystone, CO.

This is turning out to be a year of significant growth for conference centers. The International Association of Conference Centers (IACC) released a survey indicating conference centers experienced major growth in 2012.

The IACC's 2013 "Trends in the Conference Center Industry" survey, compiled by PKF Hospitality Research, says conference centers are outperforming the broader hotel sector both in occupancies and profitability.

"Our results this year indicate that a long awaited recovery is taking place," said David Arnold, CEO of East PKF Consulting, in a statement. "Corporate meetings have proven to be the last segment of the market to claw back to some semblance of former glory."

The report shows how rising demand for conference centers brought average rates up, with executive-style

conference centers outperforming with an average daily rate increase of 6 percent.

In a statement, IACC CEO Mark Cooper, said, "With improving margins and greater stability (in) the marketplace, we expect to see our members investing further in their conference environment for their clients."

The Conference Center Culture

Insurance and financial companies are a mainstay of conference center business. Cooper explains why: "A lot of the training they do involves soft skills like management, leadership and sales. They also need constant education about changing government regulations and compliance. There is also significant training for new employees just out of college."

Cooper suggests that conference

center bookings are on the upswing for several other reasons: "Being a conference center is more a philosophy and a culture than it is about physicality and size of the meeting space," he says. "Conference centers focus all of their energy on providing highly productive meeting environments, and all of their resources go into those areas rather than lots of other areas."

In addition, conference centers offer considerable value. "Meetings are back on the agenda at corporations but they are procuring very sensibly, whereas in the past, price and value came a little lower on the list," he says. "Our comprehensive all-inclusive packages are appealing because they provide value that includes everything in one price."

Despite the movement to a seller's market, planners continue to find val-

ue due to the range of customizable all-inclusive packages that satisfy both the needs of tight budgets and ROI requirements. What's more, conference centers continue to upgrade their properties and add much-wanted services and amenities.

The popularity of conference centers also is surging because their sole purpose is to help make meetings productive and successful. The entire conference center environment from meeting space and furnishings to lighting and acoustics is designed specifically to host every and any type of corporate meeting including training and education sessions, general sessions, breakouts, board meetings, new product introductions, brainstorming sessions and much more. Conference centers do it all and have added or upgraded unique teambuilding programs, informal networking gatherings and casual and fine-dining options.

It's no wonder that insurance and financial firms like Horizon Health Care Services Inc. are among the most frequent users of conference centers. According to Jeffrey Babey, senior manager, sales training and development, for the Newark, NJ-based Horizon holds at least 30 meetings annually at The Heldrich Hotel and Conference Center, located in New Brunswick, NJ. Attendance at the meetings ranges from 10 to several hundred, says Babey, who plans more than 15 meetings a year.

The Heldrich features a state-of-the-art conference center with 25,000 sf of space and Benchmark Hospitality's signature meeting concierge services. Conference facilities include the 7,400-sf Livingston Ballroom with a built-in rear screen, an 80-seat amphitheater, boardroom and 21 meeting rooms.

The Heldrich's flexibility and ser-

vices were on full display during five meetings that Horizon held at The Heldrich in September. One of the meetings was a two-day affair for 125 salespeople, brokers, clients and executives. During the meeting, the group held general sessions, breakouts and dinners that included sales and new product training as well as networking.

"The Heldrich has fantastic breakout rooms that hold 10 to 12 people and are like mini training rooms with everything needed for a great learning environment."

The meeting was highly productive in large part because everything about The Heldrich is designed to meet the

Jeffrey Babey
Senior Manager
Sales Training and Development
Horizon Health Care Services Inc.
Newark, NJ

group's needs, especially the facility's technology and audio-visual services. "They have great AV and technology people that we have gotten to know well," says Babey. "They helped us with the full AV for general sessions, projection screens, six lapel microphones, three hand-held microphones, Internet and wireless access and the

ability to do WebEx conference calls."

Babey raves about The Heldrich's breakout capabilities. "We did six to eight breakouts following each session," says Babey. "The Heldrich has fantastic breakout rooms that hold 10 to 12 people and are like mini training rooms with everything needed for a great learning environment. Each breakout room has a wall-mounted, high-definition flat screen, ports to plug in your laptop and other devices, and AV equipment we needed. The rooms also have a big box with traditional tools such as easels, scissors, markers, and dry-erase boards and markers. Some of our meetings have 16 breakouts per session, and The Heldrich easily meets that."

The Heldrich's food and beverage services also were fashioned to meet the needs of attendees. They dined at Christopher's, The Heldrich's elegant conference center restaurant that accommodates 200 guests and can be subdivided into three areas for smaller groups. "The restaurant is phenomenally flexible and ready for us like clockwork when we are running late," says Babey. "When you have a speaker that goes long, you really can't give the person the hook, and we might run over 20 or 30 minutes, but they



Ergonomic chairs are just one of the requirements in an IACC-approved conference center such as this meeting room at The Heldrich Hotel and Conference Center.

are always ready for us and never let us down.”

In addition, attendees enjoyed refreshment stations with fresh fruit, yogurt, beverages and other snacks placed throughout the conference center, including outside the doors of meeting rooms. “The food isn’t placed in the back of meeting rooms, taking up space in the training areas and being a distraction,” says Babey.

Overall, Babey swears by conference centers largely because of the value they offer. “I like the all-inclusive pricing. It makes planning and budgeting easier,” he says. “I recently booked a three-week training session at a hotel in another state. It was ‘Here’s our price for the room, food and AV.’ In the end, the \$500 per person fee for 90 people turned into almost \$1,000 a day. With conference centers, we have one fee per person per day that includes meeting space, breakout rooms, meals and AV. You can’t go wrong with that.”

Built for Meetings

Conference centers are prospering because of companies like NY-based Guardian Life Insurance Company of America (GLICA). According to Brian Brown, CMP, one of 11 event planners for GLICA, holds at least 20 meetings per year at The Inverness Hotel and Conference Center in Denver, a Destination Hotels & Resorts-managed property. The meetings, which average about 60 attendees, involve training for new hires, executives and new products; and education on government regulations and policies, says Brown.

Brown uses conference centers such as The Inverness because meetings are their specialty. “They are extremely meeting-focused from the way they have been built to their staffs to the equipment they have and pricing structure. It’s easier to learn and concentrate on the training we pro-



Certified by the IACC, The Inverness Hotel and Conference Center, located in Denver, CO, features 60,000 sf of meeting space.

vide. And we save about 15 percent on meetings. The ROI is tremendous in terms of what we invest in training people to sell our products to the public,” says Brown.

Brown planned an intensive four-day sales training meeting at The Inverness in April and planned another meeting, which is coming up in October. The April meeting consisted of general sessions followed by breakouts of up to six per day.

The Inverness excelled at meeting every need, including AV and technology. “They have the latest equipment and an AV department that can deal with any situation,” says Brown. “They have the latest tools to hook up anything such as an iPad or other device to a monitor screen and sound system. They can handle speakers’ presentation needs whether they use a flash drive, iPad, laptop or other device. A speaker can use an iPad and monitor to show salespeople how to use our online sales tools.”

The breakout rooms were well-

equipped. “Each breakout room has a phone line, speaker phone, AV equipment, flip charts and everything else needed. On the last day of the meeting, they broke into groups of five or six in different rooms. We provided video cameras and instructions on how to film each other doing role playing. They sent copies

of the films to their sales managers online after the meeting.”

Brown also raves about The Inverness’s food and beverage service. “Rates are more affordable and easier to budget,” says Brown. “Food and beverages are available not only during meals but during breaks, which are set up under the meeting package plan. The quality and quantity of food are tremendous. It’s all-inclusive so you don’t have to make head counts and try to shave off counts to save money. You don’t have to select meals and breaks separately. It’s one less worry for the meeting planner.”

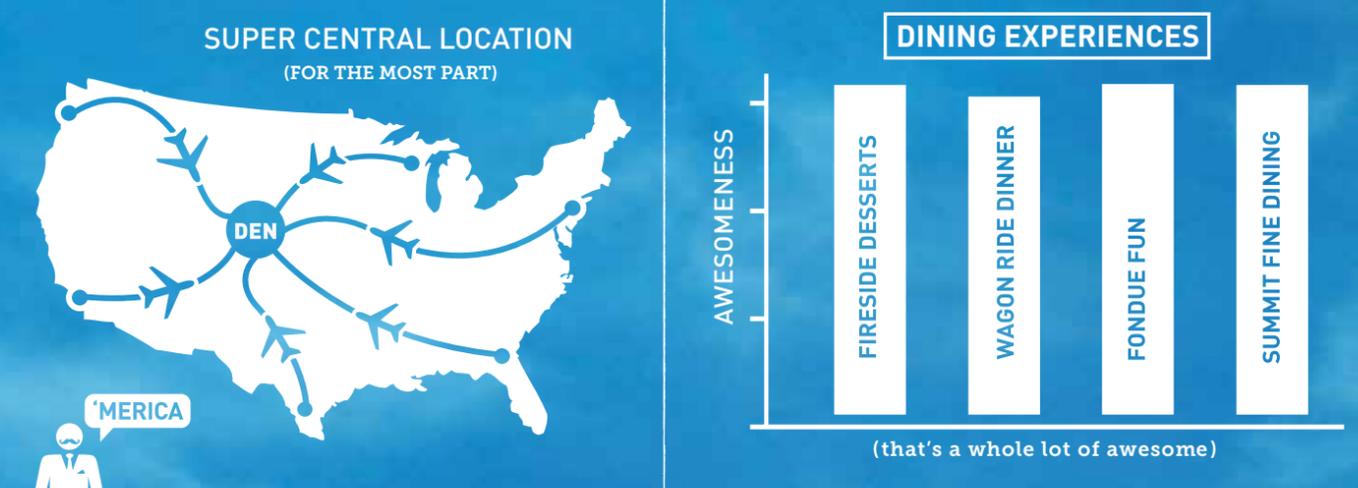
Choose Wisely

While conference center business is growing, hotels are still a magnet for corporate meetings. According to Catherine Chaulet, newly named president of GEP Destination Management, a worldwide partnership of destination management companies headquartered in Washington, DC, the type of meeting and its goal

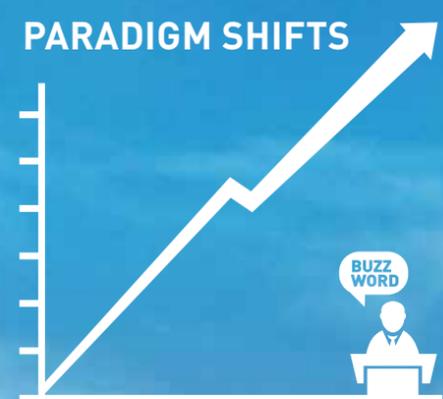


In the greater Chicago area, Eaglewood Resort & Spa features a 37,000-sf IACC-certified conference center and championship golf.

Photo courtesy of Eaglewood Resort & Spa



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help planners determine whether a company should choose a conference center or a hotel. "Conference centers are growing mostly for certain types of events, mostly mid- to small-size groups that are focused only on meetings,"

"Conference centers are growing mostly for certain types of events, mostly mid- to small-size groups that are focused only on meetings."



Catherine Chaulet
President
GEP Destination Management
Washington, DC

says Chaulet. "Some hotels don't have the meeting layout desired, and conference centers may be ideal. On the other hand, some companies that want to do much more than meet may choose hotels (located in specific destinations)," adds Chaulet.

Chaulet observes that the competition between conference centers and hotels is causing both to increasingly offer many of the same services. In the end, that is good for planners, she says. "With a lot of clients I deal with, if all things are equal, some meetings can be done just as well in a conference center or hotel because a lot of them are very aggressively providing these types of services," says Chaulet. "Either way, planners are focused on costs and whether there are additional costs incurred. They consider things like transportation, offsite activities, quality of food and flexibility."

The Latest Trends

Conference centers are prospering because they continue to offer new services and amenities to corporate groups. Here is a rundown of some of the latest trends at conference centers:

There is more demand for unique, informal meeting settings that allow attendees to interact comfortably

with each other. The trend includes ergonomic, living-room-like furniture and meeting rooms with outdoor patios. For example, Eaglewood Resort & Spa, located in Itasca, IL, managed by Benchmark Resorts & Hotels, has meeting rooms with patios and a boardroom-style table overlooking a fire pit and the golf course. Attendees can gather in the room, on the patio or flow back and forth.

Conference centers continue to update technology, increasing bandwidth for speedier online connections. Properties also are adding more electronic charging stations for portable devices throughout properties because many attendees carry two or three units. They are also providing more touchscreens, smart TVs and smart technology to control meeting room functions such as AV, sound systems, lighting and temperature.

Technology that allows groups to interact also is more popular. Attendees at some conference centers can use an application to type words into their smartphones that describe a strategy, marketing position or idea.



Located in the Fort Lauderdale, FL, area, the Bonaventure Resort & Spa's conference center provides an ideal setting for groups of from 10 to 1,000 attendees.

The technology then creates a collage of the words projected onto a screen that features the most frequently mentioned terms in larger and bolder text.

In addition, some conference centers offer planners online portals to plan meetings. For example, Dolce Hotels & Resorts is testing a portal that permits planners to plan every aspect of a meeting and communicate with conference center planners.

Conference centers also are adding more teambuilding activities such as scavenger hunts, treasure hunts, wine-tasting, cooking and cocktail-making competitions.

New and Noteworthy

- **Benchmark Resorts & Hotels**

In June, The Chattanooga in Tennessee completed a renovation that included new carpets, wall coverings, furnishings, AV equipment and flat-screen TVs. Public areas were also upgraded. The property includes a 25,000-sf conference center.

The Bonaventure Resort & Spa near Fort Lauderdale, FL, announced the resort's 60,000-sf conference center, including a 175-seat amphitheater, will be completely refurbished. The ballroom, individual meeting rooms and communal spaces also will be updated

this fall. Installation of wooden flooring in all guest rooms is planned for a future time.

Benchmark also recently completed renovations of Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, with more than 40,000 sf of conference center space; the Snow King Hotel (more than 10,000 sf of meeting space) and the Grand View Lodge (more than 7,500 sf), both in Jackson Hole, WY; and The Inn at Rancho Santa Fe, near San Diego, that features 12 meeting venues.

- **Dolce Hotels & Resorts**

The Alexander, with 16,500 sf of event space and a state-of-the-art conference center, opened earlier this year in downtown Indianapolis. Silverado Resort and Spa in Napa, CA, with 12,000 sf of meeting space, is renovating all 415 guest rooms and suites. Dolce also added to its overseas properties with the opening of the Dolce CampoReal Lisbon in Portugal.

- **Destination Hotels & Resorts**

Skamania Lodge, 45 miles east of Portland, OR, improved its meeting space, public areas, the restaurant and bar, and recreation spaces. The property also added a zip line for teambuilding activities and expanded the outdoor jacuzzi area. In Arizona, the Tempe Mission Palms Hotel and conference center added a small ballroom, and renovated its lobby, bar, restaurant and dining area.

The Inverness Hotel and Conference Center in Denver remodeled the dining facilities, pool, spa, tennis courts and recreation area. The Inverness offers 63,652 sf of meeting space and a PGA championship golf course. In downtown Seattle, the Red Lion Hotel on Fifth Avenue, a new Destination property, is undergoing a major renovation that will be completed in three phases by spring 2014. The Red Lion provides 17,715 sf of meeting and ballroom space.

IACC Guidelines

Meeting planners would do well to choose IAAC-approved confer-



An IACC-approved gem in the Rocky Mountains, Cheyenne Mountain Resort's conference center is located in one of the most inspiring settings in America.

ence centers, which adhere to strict guidelines. For example, at least 60 percent of meeting space must be dedicated, single-purpose conference space, and at least 60 percent of revenue must derive from meeting space, food and beverage, conference technology and services that are related to conferences. They



Plat 99 is a colorful, energetic lounge adjacent to the lobby at the IACC-certified Alexander Hotel, a new Dolce Hotels & Resorts property in downtown Indianapolis.

must promote a package plan that includes guest rooms, meeting rooms, three meals, continuous refreshment services, and conference center technology and services.

The facility must have dedicated

conference rooms (at least one must be a minimum 1,000 sf), ergonomically designed chairs, individual climate controls, specific acoustical rating, high-speed Internet connections and phone. Properties must have skilled conference planners, a designated conference planner for each group, office supplies, computer work stations, photocopying, digital media flash drives, computer rental and other services.

There must be at least one dining area specifically for groups that provides flexible dining areas.

Conference rooms of at least 1,000 sf must include at least one built-in remote-input computer/video-image display system, and at least one projection screen mounted from the ceiling or on the wall. Skilled technicians are also required. The guest rooms must have a desk or table, comfort-

able chair, lighting separate from overhead illumination, high-speed Internet and a phone.

Overall, an IACC-approved conference center is surely a win-win way to meet!

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Manalapan, Florida
309 Guestrooms • 33,500 ft² Meeting space



2013 World Class Award Winners



CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAUS

- Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau
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- Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority
Las Vegas, NV
- Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau
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- Nashville Convention & Visitors Corporation
Nashville, TN
- New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau
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Orlando, FL

HOTELS, RESORTS & CONFERENCE CENTERS

- ARIA Resort & Casino
Las Vegas, NV
- Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa
Atlantic City, NJ
- Caesars Palace Las Vegas
Las Vegas, NV
- Hammock Beach Resort
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Greater Miami
Convention & Visitors Bureau



Long Beach Area
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New Orleans
Convention & Visitors Bureau



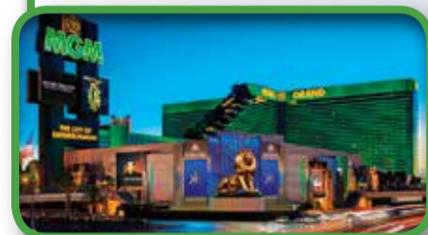
Visit Jacksonville



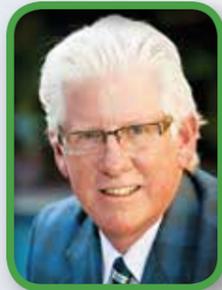
Wynn Las Vegas



The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino



MGM Grand Hotel & Casino



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Citywide Facts and Features

Guest Rooms: 50,000

Meeting Space: Miami Beach Convention Center: 502,000 sf of exhibit space; 70 flexible meeting rooms comprised of 127,000 sf and 100,000 sf of prefunction space. Ballrooms: 75,500 sf covering four separate spaces. Located 15 minutes from Miami International Airport.

Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau

The perfect meeting — one that is transformational, inspirational, illuminating, energizing, even exciting — needs a special setting. A true original that's vibrant, innovative and cutting-edge — ideally with a tropical twist to keep things cool. It's So Miami — a city with a distinctive, multicultural vibe, blending urban chic with old Florida beauty and laidback charm. Miami is the international city where you'll hear languages and dialects from around the world. Greater Miami continually reinvents itself, from chichi South Beach and the Art Deco District to the sophisticated suburbs of Coral Gables and Coconut Grove.

Activities and recreation abound in this beautiful paradise: Lounging at the beach, watersports, deep-sea fishing, swimming with dolphins, snorkeling, scuba diving, windsurfing, paddleboarding, parasailing and kayaking; playing tennis or golf at a renowned resort; indulging in pampering at a five-star spa; skimming across the Everglades on an airboat; taking a Duck Tour in an amphibious bus.

It's So Miami

Spectacular beaches, sparkling new performing arts centers, major sports venues, world-class boutiques, hotels, clubs and restaurants (5,000 of them!), two national parks and more beckon millions year-round. Miami's hotels remain forever young thanks to billions of dollars in renovations.

Major meeting facilities include the Art Deco-inspired Miami Beach Convention Center that features 502,000

sf of exhibit space, 70 flexible meeting rooms, and 100,000 sf of prefunction space. Next door is the iconic 2,700-seat Fillmore Miami Beach at the Jackie Gleason Theater and nearby is the Miami Beach Botanical Gardens with added options for indoor and outdoor event spaces.

In the heart of downtown, adjacent to Brickell Avenue and the international financial district, the Miami Convention Center has a 444-seat auditorium, 117-seat lecture hall and 34 meeting rooms. The James L. Knight Center auditorium seats 5,000 and features advanced sound and lighting systems.

There are countless venues available for groups to create one-of-a-kind events including The New World Center, home to the New World Symphony and world-class performing arts on South Beach and in downtown Miami, the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts — Florida's largest performing arts center. Attendees will enjoy a special event or baseball game at the exciting, new Marlins Park. Waterfront dining, shopping and cruising excursions at the Bayside Marketplace, a memorable dining experience at glamorous South Beach and trendy Lincoln Road are a must, too.

Getting Here

Ninety-six percent of overnight visitors in 2012 arrived by air through the newly renovated Miami International Airport. Still others docked and departed through PortMiami, the Cruise Capital of the World, which welcomed an unprecedented seven new cruise ships in the last quarter of 2012. But no matter how or when you arrive, a world of wonders awaits to invigorate your meetings and inspire your group. No wonder — It's So Miami. **I&FMM**



IT'S SO MIAMI

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President and CEO

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562-495-8333
Fax: 562-436-8606
Contact: Iris Himert
Executive Vice President
irish@longbeachcvb.org
www.VisitLongBeach.com



Citywide Facts and Features

Rooms: 4,688; **Hotels:** 24

Meeting Space:

Hotels: 219,000+ sf
Offsite: 500,000+ sf

Convention Center FYI: Located in the downtown waterfront with harbor views, the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center provides guests a stylish and welcoming social experience offering flexible event choices.

Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau

Long Beach has fast become an innovative leader in creating “a new essence of meeting style” as its \$35 million convention center renovation creates an open, comfortable environment where people can easily connect and collaborate.

A New Campus Environment

This campus, which has been created around downtown Long Beach to encourage the development and sharing of ideas, includes newly renovated hotels that are just steps from the convention center and the surrounding downtown waterfront entertainment district — a vibrant area of shopping venues, entertainment, nightlife and more than 100 quality restaurants — many with spectacular oceanfront views.

Meeting Facilities and Area Venues

The Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center offers more than 400,000 sf of modern, versatile meeting and exhibit space with new wiring for the latest technology as well as wireless capability.

The campus boasts two recently renovated VIP lounges, a full-service concierge/restaurant reservation desk, hospitality catering and an onsite audio-visual supplier with free Wi-Fi.

With 34 meeting rooms and a Grand Ballroom, three dynamic Exhibition Halls, Long Beach Arena, Center Theater and the Terrace Theater, the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center is ideal for all types of special events, conventions and trade shows.

Upgrades Galore

As part of the \$35 million renovation, upgrades at the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center now offer new and versatile special event venues such as Bogart & Co. plus attractive outdoor plazas and patios — highlighting the best in lounge and innovative event space. The newly revamped Pacific Gallery includes chic pod-style seating with customized lighting. Now planners can match their event to their imagination.

The new Pacific Ballroom at the Long Beach Arena will take its place as one of the country’s premier ballroom venues when it opens in October 2013, and will revolutionize the platform design for event spaces. The ballroom’s 46,000 sf of customizable event space features a floating tension grid and moveable, floor-to-ceiling curtain walls to create the right environment for groups. The adaptable, electronic walls will accommodate groups of all types, ranging from an intimate gathering to a lavish 5,500-person reception. Also, the Pacific Ballroom offers substantial cost savings, thanks to its all-inclusive \$1.6 million state-of-the-art lighting, sound and video system — all controlled with the simple touch of an iPad.

Long Beach is the center of Southern California, with all of the attractions in Los Angeles and Orange County just minutes from the downtown waterfront. In addition, Long Beach has world-class attractions of its own: The Queen Mary and the Aquarium of the Pacific, The Pike At Rainbow Harbor, Shoreline Village, plus four distinctive museums and two historic ranchos. Getting to Long Beach is a breeze with three major airports within 30 minutes of the city, including the newly renovated Long Beach Airport. **I&FMM**

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Meet the City that doesn’t do Ordinary. Chic. Casual. Modern. Retro. Hot, sunny days. Bright, electric nights. It’s the unmistakable contrasts and sweet contradictions that make Long Beach a city apart from the rest. So when hosting your next event, go where a world of possibilities await just a few sandy steps from your beach towel — because in Long Beach, whatever you do, you’re in for the unconventional. visitlongbeach.com



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Photo by Kathy Anderson

Citywide Facts and Features

Guest Rooms: More than 22,000 rooms within one mile of the convention center.

Meeting Space: Ernest N. Morial Convention Center: 1.1 million sf; 60,300-sf Great Hall, 25,400-sf prefunction; 4,660-sf junior ballroom
Mercedes-Benz Superdome: 269,000 sf
New Orleans Arena: 21,250 sf

New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau

Bring your meeting or event to New Orleans and you'll find more than one-of-a-kind hotels, restaurants and conference facilities in America's most unique city. A walkable place where centuries-old architecture is the backdrop for a culture so invigorating, it'll rouse your spirit. You'll discover a commitment to the future that inspires everyone who visits or meets in the most authentic city in America — New Orleans.

Award-Winning Destination

New Orleans welcomed 9.01 million visitors in 2012, the highest numbers in the city's history and an increase of 5.6 percent from 2010. In addition to hundreds of prominent conventions, New Orleans hosts major events such as Mardi Gras and the French Quarter Festival, known as the largest free music festival in the South. This year, the city also hosted Super Bowl XLVII.

Getting to New Orleans is easy and convenient, too. Louis Armstrong International Airport is located less than 30 minutes outside of the New Orleans Metropolitan Area.

Cuisine and Music

Time in New Orleans isn't kept in hours or days, but in meals. When dining in New Orleans, experience a culinary adventure that spans a wide array of cuisines. Now with more than restaurants ever from Cajun and Creole to soul and contemporary French, award-winning chefs create food for your taste buds and nourishment for your soul.

Music is where New Orleans' first settlers found common ground, and no other city loves music more. Nowhere

else does it occur more effortlessly or more joyously. Jazz was born in New Orleans while rhythm and blues, gospel, Cajun and zydeco all express the rich melting pot that is the city's heritage.

Convention & Sports Facilities

The Great Hall of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center made its debut in January 2013, featuring a 60,300-sf divisible Great Hall, 25,400-sf multiuse prefunction space, with hotel-like appointments throughout. The impressive 1-million-sf center's features include a 4,660-sf junior ballroom, complete with a 3,420-sf rooftop terrace, 980-sf indoor balcony and a 5,700-sf executive club lounge.

In 2014, New Orleans will host the WWE Wrestlemania XXX, as well as the 63rd NBA All-Star Game at the New Orleans Arena, home to the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans.

Unique Venues and More

New Orleans' venues are unparalleled, providing top-tier service to meeting and event planners with the lagniappe — a little something extra — that compels guests to return. Home to parade floats, Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World offers a diverse selection of event spaces that have successfully accommodated groups from 10 guests to 10,000. The National World War II Museum offers a one-of-a-kind aesthetic for meetings and events, and its Boeing Center offers more than 26,000 sf of space.

The 2012 AAA Southern Traveler's Best of the South list named New Orleans as the best large city of the South for the third consecutive year. With the finest convention hotels and venues anywhere in the world, the experience of meeting in New Orleans has never been better.

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NEW ORLEANS HAS SOME NEW COOKS IN THE KITCHEN



The New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau is excited to welcome industry veterans Brad Weaber, CMP and Cara Banasch to the team! With their combined expertise, vision, and passion, New Orleans is turning up the heat as one of the world's premier meetings destinations. Our experienced professionals will guide you every step of the way—from the moment you consider New Orleans as your destination until your last delegate departs—ensuring that your meeting is exceptionally executed. For more information on how Team New Orleans can make your great meeting happen here, visit us at www.neworleansmeeting.com or call **877-393-5828** today.



BRAD WEABER, CMP
Executive Vice President



CARA BANASCH
Vice President of
Convention Sales
and Strategy





PAUL ASTLEFORD
President & CEO

208 N. Laura St., Suite 102
Jacksonville, FL 32277
Contact: Marcia Noon
National Accounts Manager
800-733-2668 · Fax: 904-899-9593
convsales@VisitJacksonville.com
www.VisitJacksonville.com/meetings



Citywide Facts and Features

Guest Rooms: 17,759

Hotels/Resorts: 200

Meeting Space: 275,000 sf
at convention center.

Special Services & Amenities:

Historic architecture and state-of-the-art technology combine to create North Florida's premier convention center — the Prime Osborn, which offers 275,000 sf of flexible space.

Visit Jacksonville

Visit Jacksonville, the Visitors and Convention Bureau of the city of Jacksonville in sunny Florida, markets the destination to visitors and groups all over the world. Jacksonville and the Beaches boasts 21 miles of white, sandy beaches, riverfront hotels, natural preserves, first-class meeting venues and waterfront dining experiences. The Visit Jacksonville team has more than 300 years of combined hospitality experience and is always at the ready to plan affordable and memorable corporate group meetings and events.

Jacksonville — the largest city in the continental United States with more than 840 square miles — has the largest urban park system in the nation with seven state parks, three national parks, a natural and historic preserve, and dozens of city parks and gardens. Constantly recognized as one of the Top-25 Big Cities for Arts in the nation for their first-class museums, Jacksonville is also home to more Fortune 500 companies than any other Florida city, providing great business opportunities.

Unique Experiences

For those looking for a unique meeting or incentive program, Jacksonville provides hundreds of distinctive experiences. With an average of 220 days of sunny weather annually, attendees can head to the beaches — an uncrowded, white sandy coastline filled with relaxing and exciting activities such as surfing, fishing, kayaking as well as local dining and shopping hotspots. Discover Jacksonville's natural beauty and the outdoors by hiking,

biking, paddle-boarding and golfing — Northeast Florida is home to more than 70 golf courses open all year-long.

History buffs can immerse themselves in 6,000 years of history by visiting the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, home to important historic sites such as Fort Caroline, Kingsley Plantation and Fort George Island.

And foodies can enjoy Jacksonville's dining scene — an eclectic hybrid of inspired casual elegance and classic Southern comfort, infused with the flavors of the coast and a dash of international flair.

Meeting Facilities

The Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center is North Florida's premier convention center. Located in downtown Jacksonville, the center offers first-class service and 160,000 sf of flexible meeting space and wireless capabilities. Just minutes from the Jacksonville International Airport and less than a mile from more than 1,000 hotel rooms, the Prime F. Osborn Convention Center is the *prime* setting for any event.

Visit Jacksonville's experienced sales and services team works with more than 400 groups annually to plan, promote and execute their meetings, conventions and events in this exciting and affordable destination.

Jacksonville provides corporate groups and associations the opportunity to meet by the water — either the St. Johns River or the Atlantic Ocean — in style at beautiful, luxurious, historic, state-of-the-art venues. Visit Jacksonville works with more than 500 local partners and service companies to accommodate every group's needs, wants and budgets. The Visit Jacksonville team is ready to host your next big event.

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BRIAN KEENAN
Vice President of Sales

3799 Las Vegas Boulevard South
Las Vegas, NV 89109
800-929-1112
Fax: 702-891-1003
meetings@lv.MGMGrand.com
www.MGMGrand.com/meetings

MGM Grand Hotel & Casino

One of the most iconic resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, MGM Grand is home to A-list entertainment, award-winning restaurants by celebrity chefs, high-energy nightlife, one-of-a-kind amenities and impeccable service. The resort also is a recipient of 4 Keys by the Green Key Eco-Rating Program — the foremost “green” ranking certification program in North America evaluating sustainable hotel operations.

Ultimate Meetings, New Wi-Fi

MGM Grand offers 602,000 sf of flexible meeting and convention space including the 16,800-seat Grand Garden Arena, which is often utilized for special group events. The stand-alone Marquee Ballroom provides 92,000 sf of pillarless, multipurpose meeting space, accommodating up to 6,000 guests. Other venues include three ballrooms, 57 meeting rooms and two boardrooms. In all, MGM Grand’s conference space, integrating functionality, elegance and state-of-the-art technology, is able to host intimate gatherings of 20 guests up to large trade shows with 10,000 attendees.

MGM Grand’s combination of flexible meeting space, unique venues along with a team of 15 certified meeting planners and the skilled convention services and catering staff create unforgettable events.

Attendees can enjoy the company’s new high-density Wi-Fi system, the highest performing, next generation wireless LAN in the industry. Meeting groups now have the support they need and options to create customized Wi-

Fi networks. Within a special, private Wi-Fi network, a meeting organizer can design targeted information, provide reminders, update agendas, communicate last-minute changes and more. This new system is poised to define the future of wireless Internet experiences at resort destinations by addressing rapidly changing business demands through unique Wi-Fi services.

The Grand Renovation

Committed to maintaining the highest level of accommodations, MGM Grand’s newly redesigned guest rooms and suites feature vibrant décor, streamlined entertainment centers with media hubs and environmentally responsible elements.

Designed for gathering and entertaining, a variety of one- and two-bedroom suites feature expansive outdoor terraces with sweeping views of the famed Las Vegas Strip including the 1,500-sf Skyline Marquee Suite with an extended living area, billiard table, oversized bar and grand foyer.

MGM Grand recently opened Hakasan Restaurant and Nightclub, a five-level culinary and nightlife mecca offering a variety of environments that provide numerous options for groups of various sizes. Other new culinary offerings include Michael Mina’s PUB 1842, a gastro pub with a keg room, and Avenue 24 Bar & Grill, open 24/7.

The new Jeff Mitchum Gallery, with an eclectic collection of the fine-art photographer’s awe-inspiring landscape images and never-before-seen sculptures, creates a picturesque location for cocktail events.

And adding to MGM Grand’s stellar entertainment lineup, Emmy Award-winning comedian and actor Brad Garrett brings his comedy to Garrett’s Comedy Club, an intimate 250-seat venue. **I&FMM**



Photo by Erik Kabik

Facts and Features

Guest Rooms/Suites: 5,044 including 751 suites.

Meeting Space: 602,000 sf

Special Services & Amenities: MGM Grand’s new STAY WELL rooms and suites are the first of its kind and integrate the best of medical science and technology to promote health and wellness while traveling.

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CHANDRA ALLISON
Vice President of Sales

3355 Las Vegas Boulevard South
Las Vegas, NV 89109
702-414-4202
Fax: 702-414-4806
Chandra.Allison@Venetian.com
www.VenetianPalazzoMeetings.com



Facts and Features

Guest Suites: 7,100
Meeting Space: 2.25 million sf
Special Services & Amenities: Business Center, Venetian Showroom, Canyon Ranch SpaClub, nightly entertainment, 30+ onsite restaurants, outlets and lounges. Located minutes from McCarran International Airport.

The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino

The comfort and productivity of attendees is front and center at The Venetian and The Palazzo, a Five Diamond resort respite in the heart of The Las Vegas Strip, where networking opportunities abound, and every guest room is a plush suite. Add the seemingly unlimited all-in-one-place resources of 7,100 guest suites and more than 2.25 million sf of convention space, and you've got the ultimate convention destination.

Meeting Facilities

The Venetian convention space features one of the world's largest pillarless ballrooms at 85,000 sf, with an additional 298 meeting, conference and boardrooms. In addition, the adjacent Sands Expo features state-of-the-art convention facilities, with 1.9 million sf of newly renovated meeting and show space.

Together, the two hotels create the largest green-certified hotel property in the world. The hotels feature an unrivaled green meeting and convention program that offers a selection of environmentally responsible services.

Dining and More

To facilitate networking, attendees can enjoy delectable dining created by a host of James Beard Award-winning chefs in more than 30 onsite restaurants, outlets and lounges; more than 130 boutiques; dazzling entertainment and the calming retreat of Canyon Ranch SpaClub — renowned as the ideal place to relax, renew and re-energize. From Emeril Lagasse's Delmonico to Thomas Keller's Bouchon, to Wolfgang

Puck's Postrio, The Venetian's sumptuous Las Vegas fine-dining options promise to satisfy every palate, with new restaurants coming soon from Mario Batali, The Cake Boss Buddy Valastro and Daniel Boulud.

Superb Accommodations

The experience begins the moment attendees enter The Venetian and The Palazzo as the most exquisite resort experience in Las Vegas unfolds. The Venetian, a must-see, gotta-share-a-picture-with-friends experience, overflows with the artful, authentic charm and romance of old-world Venice. Every painstaking detail has been recreated, from the beautiful frescoes of the Colonnade to the serenading gondoliers winding their way down the Grand Canal. At The Palazzo, visitors are comforted by modern Italian design, in a world where impeccable service and unforgettable ambience are at every turn. In fact, the resort was named in the Travel Channel list of "The Ultimate 10 Hotels in the World."

The breathtaking accommodations at The Venetian and The Palazzo offer a degree of luxury unavailable anywhere else. Suites average 700 sf — roughly twice the size of the typical Las Vegas hotel room — each designed to facilitate the business needs of meeting attendees.

Also new in 2013 is The Venetian and The Palazzo Premio Travel Rewards program, a new incentive program that leverages the most popular destination in the world — Las Vegas. The potential to experience Las Vegas as a winner is the ultimate travel incentive. The Venetian and The Palazzo offer the finest in meeting space, accommodations and amenities, all set in a luxurious resort.

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Facts and Features

Guest Rooms/Suites:
Wynn – 2,716; Encore – 2,034
Meeting Space: 260,000 sf
Special Services & Amenities:
Wynn Las Vegas and Encore offer 20 fine and casual restaurants, two award-winning spas, world-class nightlife and the only golf course directly connected to a resort on The Las Vegas Strip.

Wynn Las Vegas

For corporate meeting planners who want to create an unforgettable experience in the heart of one of the most exciting cities in the world, the industry-leading meeting facilities of Wynn Las Vegas and Encore await.

There is an understanding at Wynn and Encore that their success lies in the complete satisfaction and success of every group that meets here. With more than 260,000 sf of meeting space and a staff dedicated to providing individualized service and support from initial contact to final departure, planners will experience firsthand the renowned service that has earned Wynn and Encore more Forbes Five-Star Awards than any other casino resort in the world.

Meeting Spaces

Groups large and small are brought together in beautiful, well-appointed spaces, customized and complemented with unexpected touches of elegance such as terraces and balconies that allow for a breath of fresh air and floor-to-ceiling windows that afford gorgeous views of sparkling pools, gardens and the Wynn Golf Club.

Planners looking for a dramatic difference can also book the resorts' internationally renowned nightlife venues — XS, Surrender, Tryst and Encore Beach Club — for private events.

Culinary Expertise

The catering department at Wynn and Encore creates unequalled culinary events with gourmet catering by Executive Chef James Benson. With more Forbes Four-Star Award-winning restaurants than any other resort in

North America, attendees may also enjoy any of the 20 casual and fine dining experiences where master chefs prepare their signature cuisines for private dinners or luxurious receptions. Many of the restaurants also offer indoor/outdoor experiences, serving up beautiful lake, lagoon and waterfall views along with their award-winning menus.

Recreation and Relaxation

An abundance of recreational and relaxation opportunities allow attendees to discover experiences suited to their individual interests. The award-winning spas at Wynn and Encore offer a full menu of rejuvenating services, saunas and plunge pools. The Wynn Golf Club is a magnificent par-70 course with 18 holes of challenging beauty directly connected to the resort. The shopping Esplanades of Wynn and Encore showcase the most sought-after designers, brands and specialty boutiques. Or for an exciting evening immersed in fantasy, danger and reverie, *Le Rêve – The Dream*, set in Wynn's intimate Aqua Theater and voted "Best Show in Las Vegas," combines artistic athleticism and aerial acrobatics to create a truly breathtaking experience.

Luxurious Guest Rooms

At the end of the day, the 4,750 guest rooms and suites at Wynn and Encore offer the perfect retreat with luxurious décor and amenities designed for ultimate comfort and convenience. Every guest room comes complete with beautiful views via floor-to-ceiling windows, touch-screen privacy and lighting controls and an oversized marble bath.

Wynn Las Vegas and Encore: for meetings that produce results and result in an experience greater than ever expected. **I&FMM**



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The Broadmoor, located in Colorado Springs, CO, features three championship golf courses.

Photo by Kevin Synns

Golf Programs

The Planner's Perfect Game Plan

By Michael Bassett

Meeting planners are always looking to plan the perfect program. Yet, chances are, something will always go wrong

Several years ago, Chuck Lane, now strategic consultant for incentive travel at Humana, was planning a golf program in which he specifically requested the golf course to provide two beverage carts for his group.

The carts were dutifully provided, but there was just one problem — they came without any beverages. While he had asked for the beverage carts, Lane was informed, he had said nothing about beer or soda.

Another time Lane organized a tournament for a group in Aruba and arranged for a local DMC to provide a motor coach that would run on a continuous loop between the golf

course and the group's resort. "But to my chagrin — and that of my CEO," Lane recalls, "the bus driver departed for home after his first run, leaving the CEO and all but about a dozen golfers at the course."

All of which illustrates, Lane says, "that as a planner you have to cover every detail, because if you take things for granted, you'll get killed."

Of course, planning a successful golf program requires more than making sure beverage carts are adequately stocked. It also helps if a planner chooses quality venues and has done everything to ensure that his or her attendees come off the golf course with smiles on their faces.

Quality Is No. 1

Mac Deaver, president of Missis-

sippi Bankers Association, has brought the association's annual meeting to the Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort for 10 consecutive years beginning in 2004 and has plans to return in 2014 and 2015.

Each year the convention runs from a Wednesday through a Saturday, consists of two mornings of educational sessions, a business session on the final day, a number of nightly social events, and, of course, a golf tournament. The meeting draws an average of 600 attendees every year and also includes a trade show with 60 exhibit booths.

The reason for the group's continuing affinity for the property, Deaver says, has everything to do with quality. "It provides an exclusive, upscale venue in a great Gulf Coast setting that

is affordable for our association and bank members, accessible by car, and offers a variety of activities that are attractive to attendees," says Deaver.

And golf is particularly important to the group, and one of the major factors bringing the annual meeting back to the Sandestin year after year. The annual golf tournament is the "centerpiece" of the annual convention, says Deaver. "The sponsored event is a major focal point for the many attendees who are avid golfers, and the variety of courses and the support from the professionals and staffs at these facilities makes for an excellent golfing experience."

Sandestin offers planners access to four different championship and resort courses. The Robert Trent Jones, Jr.-designed Raven Golf Club has hosted PGA Champions Tour events, while the Rees Jones-designed Burnt Pine Golf Club is highlighted by a back nine that plays along the Choctawhatchee Bay. Planners looking to offer their groups links-style play have the option of The Links Golf Club, while those looking to add some elevation changes to their group's golf experience can book the Baytowne Golf Club.

"Compared to a lot of other venues, Sandestin enjoys an advantage in that it offers multiple championship courses on property," says Deaver. "And the availability of top caliber golf facilities is an important attraction for the golfers — both bankers and vendors — who attend the convention." In fact, Deaver says, many of his attendees make every effort to use one of the Sandestin courses between convention events, in addition to participating in the annual golf tournament.

Dan Walker, principal and founder of Signature Golf Events in San Diego, CA, says that one of the things that sets a golf program apart is the ability of the planner and property to bring an event "to the next level" in order to create a memorable event.

Incentive winners from Baird, headquartered in Milwaukee, WI, tee it up at a program arranged by Signature Golf Events.

Walker plans between 70 and 90 golf events annually, many of them for insurance and financial services groups. One property that works well for group programs, says Walker, is Pelican Hill in Newport Beach, CA. With two Tom Fazio-designed championship courses, Walker calls Pelican Hill "one of the premier golf resorts in the U.S."

What makes Pelican Hill particularly appealing to golf groups, says Walker is that it "excels" at customer service. "It's a golf resort that is able to provide tournament-style golf courses matched with a great guest experience," he says. "And the fact they can pull that off is really key."

The par-71, 7,000-yard Ocean North Course has beautiful ocean views from every tee and was opened in 1993, while the par-70, 6,580-yard Ocean South Course, which opened in 1991, has several holes that run along the ocean's edge. Each course has five sets of tees so that a planner, with help from Pelican Hill's golf operations staff — can determine an appropriate level of difficulty so that every participant, no matter what his or her skill level, has an enjoyable day on the golf course.

Walker points out that Pelican Hill also has a forecaddie program, with

professional caddies who can inform players about hole characteristics and distances, find golf balls, rake sand bunkers, replace divots, clean clubs, repair golf marks and clean balls, and help players with club selection and reading greens.

Forecaddies "help the advanced player who is looking to improve their scores," says Walker, "and the beginning golfer who just wants to be more comfortable on the course." They also help speed up the pace of play, which is a frequent concern for any group golf event

Select the Right Format

The larger the group, the more there's a chance of running into a pace of play issue, and planners persist in the belief that a scramble is the best group format. "I would say about 75 percent of larger groups use a scramble," Walker says. "But the smaller, more golf-focused groups tend to use best ball (where each player on a team plays his or her ball throughout the round, with the best ball on each hole serving as the team's score)."

The traditional scramble involves players from a foursome teeing off and using the best shot from the foursome from the tee to the green. A potential



Photo courtesy of Signature Golf Events



Dan Walker arranged the annual MRF Drive for Breakthroughs, a sponsorship golf tournament that raises funds for MS research, which is supported by financial firms in the greater Chicago area.

problem with a scramble, though, is that it can slow play down and get a little stale as well. A modified scramble could keep things interesting.

One variation Lane has used is called a “shamble,” where groups use the scramble format off the tee, then have each player use their own ball. The advantage of this format is that it gives some help to players who need help getting off the tee.

One variation of a scramble that is used at Pelican Hill involves changing the tee from which a foursome hits depending on the score on the previous hole. So, for example, if a group scores a bogey or worse on a hole they’ll have to hit off a forward tee on the next hole. But, if they score a birdie they have to move back. It’s suggested as a way to speed up play and liven things up a bit. And if groups continue to have pace of play problems, Walker says, a planner can always implement a maximum score policy on a hole.

Groups that are really looking to do something different can always use something like a horse race format. In this format, teams of golfers alternating shots tee-off in a predetermined order on the first tee, with the team with the highest score on the hole being eliminated. This continues on each

succeeding hole with the eliminated teams serving as a gallery to cheer on the remaining teams. The last team standing wins.

According to Lane, this format encourages teamwork and camaraderie, but, since it’s possible that a team could get eliminated on the first hole of play, it should only be part of an event that includes several days of golf.

One thing that can give a golf pro-

“I would say about 75 percent of larger groups use a scramble. But the smaller, more golf-focused groups tend to use best ball.”



Dan Walker
Principal and Founder
Signature Golf Events, San Diego, CA

gram a little bit of a “wow” factor, says Walker, is the incorporation of electronic scoring. He’ll give each team their own iPhone with a scoring app that allows tournament foursomes to track in real time how they’re doing. “It’s something that gives everyone

something to talk about and really builds camaraderie,” he says.

Make It a Memorable Experience

For groups looking to put on a quality program, one of the most prestigious monikers in the world of golf is TPC — or the Tournament Players Club network of golf courses.

These are golf courses that were specifically designed to serve as host venues for PGA Tour events and have got “great brand recognition,” Walker says. “So when you take a group to a TPC course, you know you are going to be providing them with high-quality, high-expectation, tournament-style golf.”

TPCs arouse those kinds of expectations because the numerous PGA Tour events they host get plenty of TV coverage, enhancing their appeal for groups looking to play on the same championship golf courses that professionals such as Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson play.

There are a total of 34 TPC courses, 18 of which are resort or daily-fee properties, and 16 of which are private clubs. Those 18 resort/daily-fee properties are open for group business and include some of the most popular destinations in golf. The 16 private TPCs are available on a more restrictive basis. This year, TPC courses will host 23 Champions Tour, PGA Tour or Web.com Tour events.

The most popular TPC courses in terms of group play are TPC Sawgrass, TPC Las Vegas, TPC Scottsdale, TPC New Orleans, TPC San Antonio and the Old White TPC Greenbrier. They’re all resort/daily-fee courses, so groups are a core business at those courses.

The courses Walker most frequently books include TPC Harding Park in San Francisco, TPC Las Vegas, TPC Scottsdale, TPC Sawgrass and PGA West in Palm Springs.

Walker brings groups to one of

the TPC courses an average of once a month and says that despite the fact that each venue is a demanding test of skill for professionals, they are still playable for typical corporate groups that include golfers with a wide range of ability.

Each course provides a “great experience for the scratch golfer, but won’t frustrate the average golfer,” Walker says, adding that the key is not changing the course to fit different levels of play, but making the right decisions on how groups play each course, such as whether they use the right tees and the right formats.

Playability is something TPC courses have tried to address over the years by, for example, eliminating men’s and women’s tees and replacing them with multiple tees to ensure that players have the option to hit from places commensurate with their abilities, which leads to a more pleasurable group golf experience. Some TPCs even have “family tees,” which effec-



Golf programs accompanied new product launches for First American Funds in Milwaukee, Portland and Seattle this year.



tively creates courses that are extremely playable for children and adults just getting into the game.

All of which can help get all of their attendees — experienced and inexperienced golfers alike — comfortable and at ease on the golf course. And once they’ve achieved that, they’ve

gone a long way towards creating a successful golf program.

They just have to remember to order the drinks. **I&FMM**

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Las Vegas

An Incentive Travel Winner Every Time

By Patrick Simms

Kushch, Dmitry/istock.com

New York-New York Hotel & Casino has a variety of unique, Big Apple-themed venues for meetings and events.

Las Vegas' economy, like that of the rest of the nation, proved stronger in 2012 than a few years prior, but a "full recovery" is still elusive. While a record 39.7 million visitors came to the city last year, that bright statistic is tempered by a more sobering one: An average of \$1,021 was spent per visit last year, compared to \$1,318 per visit in pre-recession 2007, according to the Las

Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA). And last year's total gaming revenue, \$15.3 billion, was \$500 million below the 2007 figure.

Visitor spending, then, is still reserved, but the city is investing unreservedly in its tourism product, as well as its meetings infrastructure. Recently, the LVCVA completed \$20 million worth of improvements to the Las Vegas Convention Center, includ-

ing a new, modernized facade, an additional eight acres of parking, more than 1 million sf of new red carpet, energy-efficient lighting fixtures and the new American Express Open Business Lounge. The project was just one facet of the plan for a \$2.5 billion Global Business District surrounding the convention center.

Insurance and financial meeting planners are more likely to have their

eye on Las Vegas' hotels than the convention center, and fortunately there is also plenty of development in that area, from large to small properties. For example, the 1,600-room SLS Hotel & Casino opens next year with 30,000 sf of meeting space, and the 188-room Gansevoort Las Vegas debuts early next year after a \$185 million renovation of Bill's Gamblin' Hall. Meanwhile, Ravella at Lake Las Vegas has been reflagged as the Hilton Lake Las Vegas Resort & Spa, housing 354 guest rooms and 35,000 sf of meeting space.

Insurance and Financial Groups Make a Comeback

Growing along with the city's hotel portfolio is the number of incoming corporate groups this year and next, reports Stephanie Arone, DMCP, president and general manager of Las Vegas-based Activity Planners Inc. "A good part of our business is and has been the insurance and financial services market for many years now, and we have been delighted to see many of our longtime clients who had taken a 'break' from Las Vegas return to our calendars," Arone notes.

But the resurgence doesn't exactly make it easier for planners to find their ideal dates, rates and space. "Now that the overall economy is on the rebound and planning is on the up, some groups — especially those that are disproportionately high on meeting space needs compared to room block — may have some challenges in securing space too far in advance of their scheduled dates," she explains. "Consequently, groups that are minimal on their space needs are welcomed with a little more consistency, and many incentives are offered for short-term booking (under six months) to fill in around larger more space-heavy programs.

"Seasonality is always an issue in Las Vegas," Arone continues. "Our peak windows for groups (when rates are higher) is January through May

— then again September through mid-November. If planners are looking for a deal on space and rates, working outside of those windows will play to their advantage."

Mary Jo Blythe Valentine, CMP, president of La Grange Highlands, IL-based Masterplan, confirms the upward trend in corporate group visitation. Interest in Las Vegas "is definitely going back to where it was pre-2008. We don't hear clients saying, 'Oh, we can't go to Vegas' (due to perception). That's kind of over, which I think is great because Las Vegas has those large, five-star properties, of which there aren't many across the country."

Motivational Destination

It is "destination resorts" like Bellagio, Wynn Las Vegas and The Venetian that make the city not just viable for annual meetings drawing hundreds (if not thousands) of reps, but also for incentive programs. "Las Vegas is



"We have been delighted to see many of our longtime clients who had taken a 'break' from Las Vegas return to our calendars."

Stephanie Arone, DMCP
President and General Manager
Activity Planners Inc.
Las Vegas, NV

ance company whose agents are based in North America and Canada. The 35 qualifiers, along with spouses, stayed at the 2,024-room New York-New York Hotel & Casino. "The program is usually held right around the Super Bowl. Every time I send the RFP, I cross my fingers and pray!" quips Salvans-Buchborn. "However, MGM Resorts is able to offer us two or three hotels within our budget. We have used New York-New York several years in a row and find the hotel is a great host for



Activity Planners put together this mock casino event at Aria Resort & Casino for a large financial client as a fundraising benefit for a local charity.

a great convention destination, but most people overlook it for incentives, and they shouldn't," asserts Carla Salvans-Buchborn, CMP, president of Richmond, TX-based Meeting Innovations. "With amazing restaurants, incredible shows, numerous direct domestic/international flights daily and some of the best hotels in the world, it is a great place to host an incentive for every budget."

In February, Meeting Innovations staged an incentive trip for an insur-

this client. It offers excellent value in rates, even during high convention season, leaving us with enough room in the budget to add on show tickets and additional networking events. It's definitely a win-win for everyone."

The property offers 21,000 sf of meeting space, but also several atypical places for groups to gather, notes Salvans-Buchborn. "The hotel has always been able to offer us options other than a ho-hum, four-walled function room. One of our meetings



The 1,600-room SLS Hotel & Casino opens on the Las Vegas Strip next year with 30,000 sf of meeting space.



Gansevoort Las Vegas debuts early next year after a \$185 million renovation of Bill's Gamblin' Hall.



Photo courtesy of MGM Resorts International

MGM Grand's five-level Hakkasan Restaurant and Nightclub opened this past spring.

is actually held in one of their restaurants, which is closed during the day. The hotel team is amazing in setting up AV and catering in their unique venues, and our attendees revel in the fact they don't feel closed-in to a banquet room.

"This particular client gives a lot of free time to their attendees," Salvans-Buchborn continues. "However, they always plan a welcome reception at the hotel and offer the group show tickets. We've hosted many events at the Cirque du Soleil shows — 'The Beatles Love' and 'O' being some of our favorites. But no matter what off-site venue we take our attendees to, they always end up at New York-New York's Center Bar or the Bar at Times Square — the dueling pianos are their absolute favorite."

New Projects Galore

Malaysia-based Genting Group announced the acquisition of the partially completed Echelon project from Boyd Gaming. The once highly touted project, on the former site of the Stardust Hotel, fell apart during the recession after construction had begun. Genting, which operates casinos in Singapore and New York, bought the project for less than \$500 million and will invest an additional



Photo courtesy of Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino

Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino's Shark Reef Aquarium features new event space with a living marine-life backdrop

\$1.5 billion to develop an 87-acre, Asian-themed casino hotel complex under its Resorts World brand. The new property is expected to open in 2016.

The area between New York-New York and the Monte Carlo Resort and Casino will be revitalized next summer in preparation for a new \$350 million, 20,000-seat indoor arena being developed by MGM Resorts International and AEG, projected for completion in spring 2016. The front facades of both hotels will be transformed into an outdoor plaza with dining and shopping establishments, including a two-story Hershey's Chocolate World.

Another major MGM Resorts project was completed last fall at the company's Las Vegas flagship property, the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. As part of a \$160 million remodeling, the 3,570 guest rooms and 642 suites in the Grand Tower were redesigned and equipped with environmentally responsible features including LED lighting, solar shades and biodegradable bath amenities.

And this spring, Hakkasan Las Vegas Restaurant and Nightclub debuted at MGM Grand. Hakkasan offers a variety of environments, including the restaurant, private dining room, Ling Ling level, main nightclub, pavilion and mezzanine.

Other MGM Resorts properties are also featuring new restaurants. The 230-seat Tom Colicchio's Heritage Steak opened at the 3,044-room Mirage Hotel & Casino (more than 170,000 sf of meeting space) in August, and Morimoto Las Vegas will debut at the hotel next spring. The 4,004-room Aria Resort & Casino (300,000 sf of meeting space) introduced FIVE50 Pizza Bar, by James Beard award-win-

"With amazing restaurants, incredible shows, numerous direct domestic/international flights daily and some of the best hotels in the world, it is a great place to host an incentive for every budget."

Carla Salvans-Buchborn, CMP
President
Meeting Innovations
Richmond, TX

ning chef Shawn McClain, in July and remodeled its Aria Buffet last fall.

Wynn Las Vegas has more Forbes Four Star restaurants than any other casino hotel in North America. One of the newest is Wing Lei, voted Best Chinese Restaurant by Las Vegas Life. The only Asian restaurant in North America to earn a Michelin star, Wing Lei's offerings include a mix of Cantonese, Shanghai and Szechwan dishes.

Mandalay Bay is perhaps the MGM Resorts property with the greatest variety of new venues, including the 1,675-sf Seascape Ballroom within Shark Reef Aquarium. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame a living seascape as the backdrop for up to 100 attendees in a reception and up to 80 seated. Mandalay Bay itself is the backdrop for groups gathering at the



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new Daylight Beach Club, offering 50,000 sf of flexible outdoor space. And the hotels within Mandalay Bay also have news to report. Early this year, Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, located on floors 35–39 of Mandalay Bay, completed a renovation of its 424 guest rooms and suites. In addition, the 1,100-suite THEhotel will become Delano Las Vegas, a South Beach-style resort scheduled to open next spring.

Speaking of hotels within hotels, the 3,960-room Caesars Palace introduced the 181-room Nobu Hotel and Restaurant in February, featuring an 11,200-sf restaurant by celebrity chef Nobu Matsuhisa. Caesars also recently opened a new lineup of 15 remodeled stores at Appian Way Shops. Meanwhile, the 2,814-room Bally's Las Vegas renovated and renamed its 756-room South Tower as the all-new Jubilee Tower this summer. Caesars offers 300,000 sf of meeting space and Bally's offers 175,000 sf.

The Tropicana Las Vegas currently offers more than 60,000 sf of meeting space, but plans were announced this summer to expand the facilities to more than 100,000 sf. The 1,502-room hotel will begin its expansion by constructing five, 650-sf breakout rooms on the second floor of the Club Tower. As part of the transformation, the resort will expand the Tropicana Pavilion, which is a wing of the hotel's conference center, to more than 55,000 sf.

The 4,027-suite Venetian Resort Hotel Casino, together with the Sands Expo and the 3,066-suite Palazzo



Celebrity chef Nobu Matsuhisa captains the restaurant at the new Nobu Hotel at Caesars.

prefunction space, three breakout rooms, an executive boardroom and a rooftop pool area for special events. Coming soon is Silk Road, a new 6,400-sf, intimate meeting/event space that accommodates up to 200 attendees. The space includes a 3,700-sf Junior Ballroom and 900-sf breakout room, and features views of Aria Resort & Casino and its Big Edge sculpture.

Planners looking for unique amenities will find plenty of them at South Point Hotel Casino & Spa, located just off The Strip. There's a 16-screen cineplex, a 64-lane bowling center, an equestrian center, world-class spa and a 400-seat showroom, which presents entertainment at night

Resort Hotel Casino, house a total of 2.25 million sf of function space, including the 85,000-sf Venetian Ballroom. There's always something new at The Venetian, and the most recent buzz surrounds B&B Burger &

A rendering of a new bowling tournament facility at South Point Hotel Casino & Spa scheduled to open in 2015.



Rendering courtesy of South Point Hotel Casino & Spa

Beer, a 120-seat casual eatery by Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich. It is complemented by a 2,000-sf outdoor, 100-seat patio facing Las Vegas Boulevard.

Hyde Bellagio, the new lounge and event space overlooking the Fountains of Bellagio, transforms into one of the city's hottest spots after dark featuring established and up-and-coming disc jockeys.

Specializing in smaller groups that desire to "Do Vegas Differently" is Vdara Hotel & Spa at CityCenter next to Aria Resort & Casino. It's an all-suite, non-gaming, non-smoking, eco-friendly property catering to groups of from 10 to 300 attendees. The 1,495-suite hotel's 10,000 sf of conference space includes a 3,900-sf ballroom, 3,500 sf of

but can be used for meetings during the day. A new \$30 million bowling tournament facility with more than 60 lanes is expected to be completed by fall 2015. As a result, South Point, the United States Bowling Congress (USBC), Las Vegas Events, and the LVCVA announced a 12-year deal to host several annual USBC events, both citywide and inside.

Other relatively new event venues include those at the 390-room M Resort Spa Casino, which received the 2013 AAA Four Diamond award as well as the Forbes Four Star rating for not only the hotel but its 23,000-sf Spa Mio. Included in the hotel's 92,000 sf of meeting and conference space is the freestanding, 23,000-sf M Pavilion, which can handle large-scale galas for up to 2,300 attendees. Planners



Photo courtesy of Vdara Hotel & Spa

Rendering of Vdara's new Silk Road event space.

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can hold even larger outdoor events with up to 4,000 attendees at the 100,000-sf Villaggio Del Sole pool and entertainment space. Lux on the 16th floor features 7,200 sf of unique, flexible space for private dinners and events with expansive views of The Strip. The hotel's elevated location also allows attendees to enjoy optimal views of the Las Vegas skyline



The lobby at the M Resort Spa Casino.

Photo courtesy of M Resort Spa Casino

from guest rooms and the conference center as well as restaurants.

Sky-High Experiences

There are many more ways to ensure attendees experience memorable views of The Strip. Those visiting the city this December and thereafter will be able to board the 550-foot-tall High Roller observation wheel at the Linq, a 300,000-sf, \$550 million dining, shopping and entertainment venue

open Dinner in the Sky Las Vegas. The upscale dining attraction serves meals 180 feet in the air, with 360-degree views of The Strip and surrounding mountains. The venue on the ground will feature a 6,500-sf main events center and a 10,000-sf private event space.

Groups can enjoy yet another sky-high view via helicopter by working with a company such as Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters or Maverick Helicopters, as Blythe suggests. "That's a great event for an incentive program. We do a little champagne reception and then take them up for 30 minutes. It's an exhilarating kick-off for the evening."

"We don't hear clients saying, 'Oh, we can't go to Vegas' (due to perception). That's kind of over, which I think is great because Las Vegas has those large, five-star properties, of which there aren't many across the country."



Mary Jo Blythe Valentine, CMP
President
Masterplan
La Grange Highlands, IL

by Caesars Entertainment. The High Roller will have cabins large enough to accommodate groups of 40 attendees. Also at Linq will be a branch of Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Another breathtaking new venue not for the acrophobic is the soon-to-

open Dinner in the Sky Las Vegas. The upscale dining attraction serves meals 180 feet in the air, with 360-degree views of The Strip and surrounding mountains. The venue on the ground will feature a 6,500-sf main events center and a 10,000-sf private event space.

Country superstar Shania Twain is the latest attraction at The Colosseum at Caesars Palace. Like Celine Dion and Elton John who have multi-year arrangements, Twain started a two-year stint last December.

With the opening of his epony-

"Michael Jackson ONE," premiered at Mandalay Bay on June 29. According to a statement, "ONE" is a "state-of-the-art visual and audio experience creating a theatrical evocation of Michael's creative genius."

Also by Cirque du Soleil, the awe-inspiring "Zarkana" is now at Aria. An acrobatic, musical spectacle with a diverse cast of more than 75 international artists, Zarkana creates a fantasy world in which a circus comes back to life.

In January, DJ Pauly D launched his latest residency at Haze Nightclub at Aria. The reality star, best known for appearing on MTV's "Jersey Shore," brings his Turnt Up party to the cutting-edge nightlife venue, providing guests with a fist-pumping good time.

Entertainment

The Las Vegas entertainment scene is fueled by superstar headliners such as Celine Dion, Shania Twain and Elton John, world-renowned theatrical presentations such as exotic Cirque du Soleil shows and the interactive masterpieces

Beyond the Neon

"For the adventurous spirit, there is so much that Las Vegas offers as activities 'beyond the neon,'" Arone confirms. "The Southwest desert location and favorable weather offer a number of exciting activities for incentive groups. Those who have a 'need for speed' can satisfy that at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, where they can have a hands-on experience behind the wheel of a Ferrari F430 Race Car, or a good old American stockcar.

Should they prefer to take to the skies, they can learn to be a Sky Combat Ace, or sit behind the controls of an authentic flight-training simulator (at Sky Combat Ace in Henderson)."

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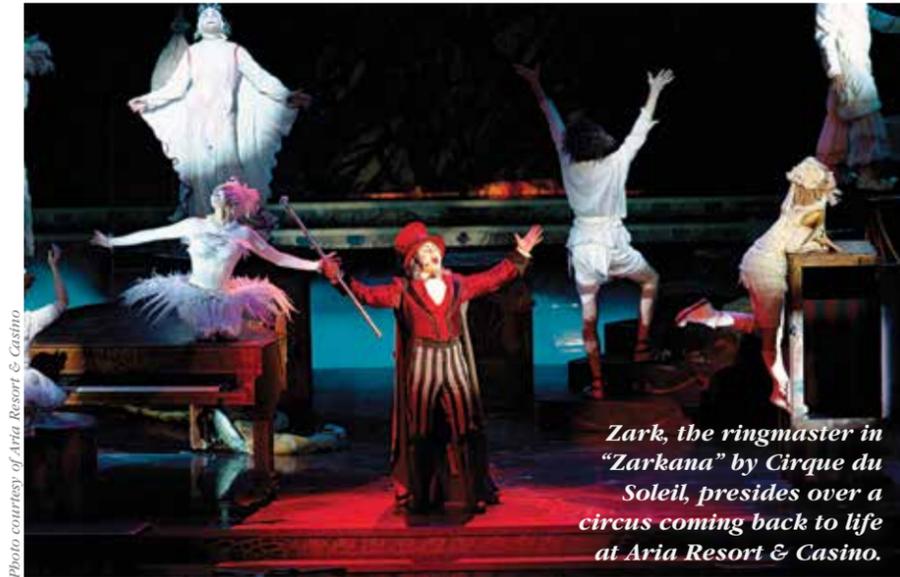


Photo courtesy of Aria Resort & Casino

Zark, the ringmaster in "Zarkana" by Cirque du Soleil, presides over a circus coming back to life at Aria Resort & Casino.

She cites many other intriguing offsite activities for thrill-seeking corporate attendees in the city, including trapeze school at Trapeze Las Vegas, AntiGravity Yoga and UFC training at UFC Gym.

Giving Back

Also "beyond the neon" are opportunities to give back to the local community during attendees' free time. And there's no reason that gaming and giving can't be combined, as Activity Planners Inc. has demonstrated. "One large financial group client of ours incorporated a CSR function into their welcome reception, where we created a mock casino with a 'win as much as you can' concept," Arone explains. "That's not new to Las Vegas, but the twist was that the top performers throughout the evening were ranked on a live leaderboard, and the top three were awarded with donations made to the selected charity in their name. The local charity was standing by at the event to offer additional 'funny money' buy-ins to those who made cash donations during the course of the night, and the combination resulted in a high-energy, highly competitive event for over 1,800 people — all for a very worthy cause."

Reno-Tahoe

The city of Reno is not merely a more cost-effective alternative to Las

Vegas. It has a distinct appeal largely based in its high-desert-valley surroundings at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. Groups can now get a sense of the natural beauty of the area immediately upon arrival at Reno-Tahoe International Airport, which recently completed a 17-month, \$26 million



The Reno-Tahoe area offers outdoor adventures from ATV-ing to snowskiing.

construction program that has incorporated a Lake Tahoe theme throughout the first floor of the terminal building, with tiles evoking images of the Truckee River and rock installations on the columns.

Digital displays of the Reno-Tahoe area now grace the main entrance of Grand Sierra Resort, thanks to an ongoing \$25 million renovation. The project covers the hotel's 2,000 guest rooms, meeting space and lobby, and includes the addition of Wet, a new ultra-lounge; Cantina, a small-plates Mexican restaurant; and an indoor pool and racquetball court, still to come this year. At 200,000 sf, the Grand Sierra's meeting space rivals that of Las Vegas' mega-resorts.

Meanwhile, the 422-room Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa and Casino has completed a \$20 million renovation of its guest rooms, Sierra Café and the Spa Terrace Conference Center. A \$500,000 upgrade of Hyatt's meeting space, which includes 50,000 sf of indoor-outdoor space overlooking Lake Tahoe, was completed at the end of 2011.

That was a very significant year for the AAA Four Diamond, 1,623-room Peppermill Resort Spa Casino, which then completed a two-year project to harness the power of a geothermal well more than a mile beneath the resort. Geothermal energy now heats all 2.1 million sf of the Peppermill as well as all of the property's water, including the 43,000-sf Spa Toscana and two outdoor swimming pools and spas. The resort's 106,000 sf of meeting space includes the 62,000-sf, clear-span Tuscany Ballroom.

Physically active attendees have some of the nation's finest ski resorts at their disposal in Reno's environs, and several are busy with upgrades. Northstar California has completed \$30 million in capital improvements, including a new 1,440-foot detachable quad chairlift and a new 700-seat on-mountain restaurant atop the resort's Tahoe Zephyr Express Lift, featuring expansive views of the Pacific Crest. And as part of more than \$6 million in capital improvements, Kirkwood Mountain Resort has installed two new activity hubs in the heart of the resort's Mountain Village: the High Alpine Adventure Center and the ZipTahoe Canopy Tour. **I&FMM**

Photo courtesy of the Grand Sierra Resort



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WALKER



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Stephanie Walker was promoted to director of sales for The Lodge at Torrey Pines, La Jolla, CA. She was associate director of sales.

Jerry Jensen was named director of sales and marketing for Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center, Scottsdale, AZ. A veteran of more than 30 years in hospitality sales and marketing, he previously served as director of sales

and marketing for the Westward Look Wyndham Grand Resort & Spa in Tucson, AZ.

The Westin Lake Las Vegas Resort & Spa, Henderson, NV, has named **Michael Pramshafer** as resort vice president of sales and marketing. He most recently served as executive director of sales at Stratosphere Hotel & Tower in Las Vegas.

The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, Scottsdale, AZ, has appointed **Chris Budd** as director of sales. Most recently he was senior national sales manager at Wynn Resorts in Las Vegas.

Mark Adams was appointed director of sales at Terranea Resort, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA. He was director of group sales at the Anaheim Marriott, Anaheim, CA. **I&FMM**

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