

Arizona

Where Planners Create Exceptional Events on the Desert Canvas

By Christine Loomis

Arizona is a place where the term “larger than life” might have originated. The scale of grandness here is off the charts, starting with the mother of all grand things, the Grand Canyon. Even Arizona’s state flower is, by comparison to most flowers, larger than life, blooming as it does on those soaring towers of the Sonoran Desert, saguaro cactus.

Some of the state’s most famous, and infamous, characters loom large in our history and collective imagination — Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Geronimo and Cochise, among them. Arguably the most famous shootout in American history, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, took place in Tombstone, Arizona, and the incident still conjures up the very essence of the Wild West, a place where those who were strong enough, fast enough, smart enough, brazen enough and bold enough could not only survive but thrive — at least long enough to make a fortune or a name for themselves...or both.

The inherent wildness of the West lives on in the vast landscapes of the Sonoran Desert and in the culture and history of Native Americans and cowboys, which visitors can tap into; however, brand-spanking new, trending and sophisticated define the state, too.

The combination of all the above makes Arizona a compelling meeting destination — that and glorious weather much of the year. As for summers, budget-friendly options pair nicely with AC, and most desert evenings cool down to surprisingly pleasant temps. Beyond all that, each city and region also brings its own special something to the meeting table.

Part of the greater metropolitan area called The Valley of the Sun, Scottsdale embodies everything that name conjures up — a stunning valley edged by mountains under deep blue skies with the bright Western sun shining down. Upscale and the epitome of modern sophistication, Scottsdale also celebrates its Western roots in Old Town, where some of the city’s top restaurants can be found alongside galleries and eclectic shops.

That’s just the start of its diversity. Heather Husom, DMCP, general manager of Scottsdale-based Hello! Arizona Destination Management, says, “A planner may bring the same group several years in a row, yet each year the guests will be in awe of the experiences and discoveries to be made.”

She notes that incorporating local culture, for example, has almost endless possibilities. “It may include entertainment such as Native American storytellers or hoop dancers, an all-female mariachi band, an aura reader, potbellied pig racing, state historians or a foot rodeo.”

Ditto activities. Of course there’s riding horses and learning about cowboy life, Husom notes, and there are historic native ruins and ancient petroglyphs that provide insight into the past.

Valley of the Sun

But, she adds, groups also can book four-wheeling adventures in the desert in a variety of vehicles, from Jeeps and Hummers to a military-grade Tomcar off-road vehicle, and there’s rafting, fishing, kayaking and even drone shooting, too.

And because Scottsdale is “the embodiment of casual elegance,” Husom says it’s possible to create extraordinary events on the desert canvas.

“We recently had a client who wanted a unique evening to reward top producers and make them feel incredibly special. The group had a history of fine dining, so we created a sensational desert dining experience of a lifetime. We built 20 tasting tables, each to seat 12–15 people. Each custom table had its own décor, menu, wines and its own award-winning chef who prepared a four-course dining experience under the stars — 20 chefs at 20 tables.

“Each table featured a menu to showcase the chef’s signature dish plus a pre-selected wine pairing to enhance the culinary experience. The artistry of the individual chefs coupled with the individual table décor, entertainment and the

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backdrop of an Arizona sunset mesmerized our guests,” Husom says.

The event was a huge success, but it’s just one of countless possible custom experiences to be found or created in the Sonoran Desert.

Scottsdale accommodations range from moderately priced hotels to opulent resorts. A favorite is The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa, which brings the region’s Scottish heritage into the mix with a resident bagpiper who plays to the sunset each evening, and a Scotch Library where individuals and groups can learn, among other things, about Scotch pairings and taste from an extensive collection of fine Scotch whiskey, both blended and single malt. There are even a few very rare bottles among the more than 200 labels.

Ed Siegel, president of Pittsburgh-based EBJ Consultants Inc., brought the IMARK Group Inc. to The Westin Kierland for the company’s 2012 annual meeting. Based on the success of that meeting, the group is booked at the resort for its 2016 annual meeting, which will take place in October.

“Scottsdale has just about everything we look for in a meeting destination: great and dependable weather, a very good airport with non-stop service from many of

our participants’ home cities, excellent optional dining and shopping opportunities, and an enormous number of quality golf courses for our very avid players,” Siegel says.

The resort met the group’s requirements for “superior meeting space, a large number of upscale sleeping rooms in an easily accessible area, high-quality recreational facilities and a reasonable rate during the high-demand convention season.” Its walking distance to Kierland Commons and Scottsdale Quarter was a bonus.

Siegel says The Westin Kierland’s sales team and staff were also factors. “Tracy Davies and Lara Anderson made us feel welcome and comfortable during the negotiation process, and were very visible and helpful in follow-up during our weeklong

conference. The staff of the golf shop, headed by Nancy Dickens, could not have been more professional or helpful to both myself and our guests, before and throughout our stay.”

The group utilized a large number of breakout rooms and the Kierland Grand Ballroom for the two-day, one-on-one sessions and group banquets. The Marshall’s Outpost area worked well for the outdoor welcome dinner, which included more than 700 guests. Siegel says many of the attendees used the Agave Spa, and a large number of golfers “thoroughly enjoyed the very fair yet challenging golf” on the resort’s Troon-managed course.

“Since our meeting in 2012 was such a success, there is very little that we plan to change for this year’s meeting,” Siegel notes. “We did add entertainment to our welcome dinner at Marshall’s Outpost, where we once again expect over 700 guests to enjoy a warm October evening in an outdoor setting.”

Siegel advises planners considering the property to reserve the space as far in advance as possible. “The hotel is extremely busy during the high seasons and is even heavily booked in the traditionally slower seasons of winter and summer,” he says.

Phoenix

There’s so much new in Phoenix, especially in the downtown area, that planners may have a hard time keeping up. Within a mile of the Phoenix Convention Center are more than 3,300 hotel rooms with an additional 320 coming in 2017.

Occupying the historic former Professional Building, Hilton Garden Inn Phoenix Downtown melds art deco architectural details with a stylish design and stellar location. In April, the Lexington Hotel reopens as FOUND:RE, a property centered on local and modern art. Lurhs City Center Marriott will open this year downtown, featuring two Marriott brands, a Courtyard and a Residence Inn. Just north, The Camby, its name a nod to horizon-defining Camelback Mountain, offers more than 20,000 sf of meeting space and a look that’s timeless, bold, innovative and contemporary all at once. Perhaps most interesting, Phoenix now has the state’s first and only distillery using locally grown grain. Arizona Distilling Company won a double gold in one prestigious competition for its Desert Dry Gin. Ask about private tours for groups.

Greater Maricopa County: Mesa, Carefree and Paradise Valley

Maricopa County doesn’t end with Phoe-



Credit: The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa

The Acacia Course at The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa.



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nix and Scottsdale. It has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to hotels and resorts, and its towns showcase the diversity of the extended metropolitan area.

Arizona's third largest city covers 133 square miles. Sitting 20 miles east of Phoenix and less than 12 miles from Sky Harbor International Airport, Mesa prides itself on offering planners the Arizona experience they want for their attendees — at a lower cost. The city's multitude of lakes and rivers and its proximity to Tonto National Forest make it easy to incorporate Arizona's natural landscapes into a meeting via offsites and team-building options. Mesa hotels include 5,452 guest rooms and 140,000 sf of meeting space; some have adjoining conference centers.

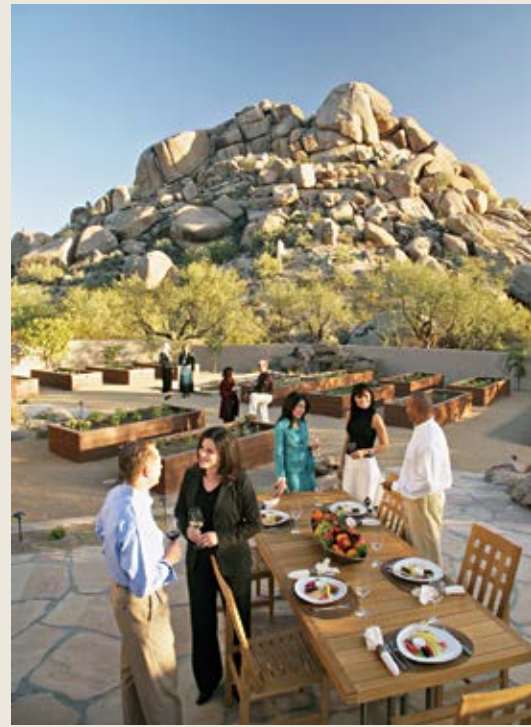
Among the city's stellar venues is Mesa Arts Center, with performances, meeting spaces and a host of programs, including immersion art experiences and options for spouses and teambuilding. Several area museums have meeting space and education opportunities, particularly related to native cultures, and Visit Mesa's Fresh Foodie Trail takes attendees to local farms, gardens, a dairy, a winery and mills in Mesa and neighboring Gilbert and Queen Creek, as well as to farmer's markets and food-truck events.



Credit: Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort

A rendering of the new Spa House debuting this month at Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort.

Thirty-five miles north of Phoenix, Carefree encompasses 8.9 square miles of spectacular nature. The Boulders Resort & Spa has thoroughly embraced its landscape and made it part of the resort experience — a bonus for guests and for planners looking to inspire attendees and incen-



Credit: The Boulders Resort & Spa

A gathering in the Herb Garden at the Boulders.

tive qualifiers. The resort encourages attendees to get out of meeting rooms and into its 1,300 acres.

Options include Cowboy for a Day programs and a culinary hunt via golf cart where every clue leads to a striking vista and interesting culinary bites. The resort offers a glowing hot-air balloon and nighttime vertical rides above its golf course, and foraging for edible goodies under the guidance of a master gardener. Wellness programs include outdoor yoga and brain-fitness classes, as well as a group shamanic experience for spiritual growth. Perhaps the most endearing option is inviting Mijja and Burrito, the resort's two "beer burros," to a group's reception where they offer beer from their saddlebags and memorable photo ops.

Paradise Valley, 14 miles northeast of Phoenix, is known for its dramatic mountains, including Mummy Mountain in the central valley and Camelback Mountain to the south. It is also known among C-suite execs and high-end incentive groups as home to Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort, where luxury, privacy and exclusive amenities provide a top-tier experience. The resort's private homes offer a combination of luxury lodging and a venue for intimate gatherings and high-level meetings, and they're close to all the resort offers. Debuting this month is the Spa House, a 3,500-sf, four bedroom private hideaway for executive corporate gatherings and featuring in-home spa services. Nearby are four new 875-sf casitas. ■

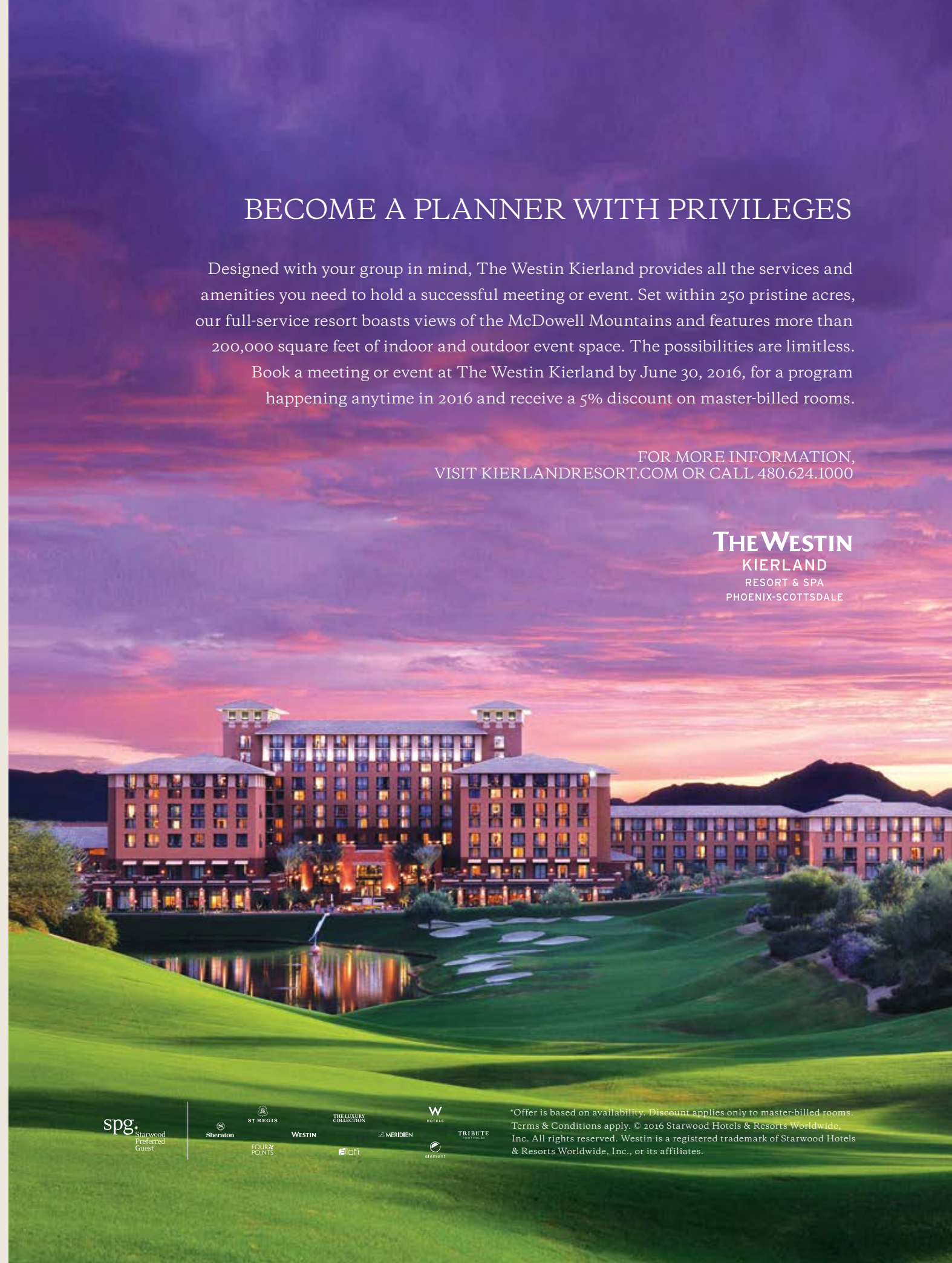
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Tucson & Marana

Tucson has its own compelling geological drama, surrounded as it is by five mountain ranges. It sits at 2,643 feet above sea level and is one of the sunniest cities in the nation. In addition to miles of paved bike paths, Tucson also has more than 300 miles of mountain biking trails



The Fiesta de los Vaqueros Tucson Rodeo, Tombstone street performers and Old Tucson Studios (opposite page) capture the Wild West spirit of Tucson.



Credit: Visit Tucson

and many more miles of trails for hikers, horseback riders and shared use, giving outdoor enthusiasts plenty to do when business wraps up — no wonder the city draws 7 million visitors annually.

Tucson's historical roots include Hohokam people who lived and farmed in the valley for 4,000 years, Spanish missionaries, soldiers, Mexican families, Western expansionists and others. The rich cultural mélange gives Tucson a colorful vibe, and planners will want to bring some of that culture into meetings to provide a compelling sense of place.

The city and surrounding area have no lack of meeting-friendly hotels and resorts to choose from, and there are ranches where groups can



Credit: Desert Diamond Casino & Hotel

mix business with authentic ranch activities that foster teambuilding and leadership training. At White Stallion Ranch, for example, groups can participate in Wisdom Horse Coaching, a highly interactive leadership program that requires no previous equestrian experience. There also are resorts with phenomenal golf and tennis facilities, The Westin La Paloma Resort & Spa and Loews Ventana Canyon Resort among them.

The Desert Diamond Casino & Hotel offers options for private group entertainment and events in the Monsoon Night Club.

Hotel updates in Tucson include the historic

Credits: Visit Tucson

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Tucson & Marana



Credits: The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain



The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain (top) offers a slate of localized activities for groups that want to experience the wonders of the Southwest, including astronomer-guided stargazing.

Marana

In Marana, just west of Tucson along I-10, are more choices for planners. To start, Marana is home to the AAA Five Diamond Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, with more than 40 options for meeting and function space, from ballrooms and boardrooms to outdoor venues with the Tortolita Mountains as backdrop.

Groups can participate in such activities as cooking classes, nighttime golf, guided rock art tours to discover ancient Hohokam petroglyphs, geocaching hikes, cactus discovery tours and astronomer-guided stargazing, to name a few, all of it enhanced by Ritz-Carlton's impeccable service and upscale amenities. Attendees also can gain some cultural inspiration during a nightly Spirit of Adventure Celebration that features a Native American flutist performing from the surrounding Tortolita Foothills.

To more meaningfully connect with the local community, The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain also offers VolunTeaming programs, which combine teambuilding activities with community service volunteer activities.

Marana is more than an adjunct to Tucson. The city has its own draws including easy access to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport (100 miles) and Tucson International (31 miles), as well as its own regional airport where private jets can touch down and their passengers can be at five-star resorts in minutes.

Toby Parks, tourism and marketing manager for Discover Marana, a local DMC, says, "Been there, done that? Check out Marana. As the gateway to Southern Arizona, Marana is brimming with adventure, excitement and fun for the whole family or the most serious of meetings."

Among the city's highlights, Parks points out, are an array of accommodations from five-star to mid-range hotels, venues for every possible purpose, outstanding local restaurants and catering, easy-to-navigate roadways, easy access to I-10 and exceptional recreational activities — especially in the Tortolita Mountains.

"The Tortolita mountain range offers nationally recognized hiking and biking trails," Parks says, "and a visit to awe-inspiring Saguaro National Park provides memories that will last a lifetime."

The national park is home to the nation's largest cactus, the giant saguaro. Although it's found in only a small portion of the United States, this desert giant is a singular symbol of the American West, especially when silhouetted against a brilliant orange sunset. ■

Tucson landmark Hacienda Del Sol Guest Ranch, which just completed a multimillion-dollar expansion that added 32 guest rooms and a new 5,100-sf event space, the Casa Luna Ballroom.

Hilton Tucson El Conquistador Golf & Tennis Resort embarked this spring on the largest makeover in its 34-year history. Renovations of all 428 guest rooms and the lobby will be completed by spring 2017. Started last fall and completed this spring was a redesign of the pool area and the addition of new courtyards.

Miraval Resort & Spa recently introduced a program that offers a new taste of the area — an immersive beekeeping experience led by a local resident professional beekeeper. Participants don protective gear and harvest honey; partake in a tasting of local honeys; and learn all the buzz on bees' role in our ecosystem through a series of lectures.

Desert Diamond Casino & Hotel adds something else to the meeting experience. Owned by the Tohono O'odham Nation, Desert Diamond is a place where attendees can enjoy gaming in their free time, but also where they can experience native culture firsthand. Planners can incorporate a traditional basket-dance performance into receptions or learn about and taste traditional native foods at a local co-op farm. The Mission San Xavier del Bac, a historic Spanish mission on the Tohono O'odham San Xavier Indian Reservation, provides insight into the history of missions throughout the Southwest.

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Sedona

Sedona is a four-season destination with typically balmy temperatures and 300 days of sunshine annually. Add its famously rose-hued rocks, widely acknowledged spiritual connections and a location almost halfway between Phoenix and the Grand Canyon, and it's a destination with powerful drawing potential.

Sedona offers a range of resorts and hotels to meet a planner's needs and easy access into a surrounding landscape that can be described without hype as breathtaking. It effortlessly provides what incentive groups are looking for — "wow" and all. But it's also an ideal site for an executive retreat, a corporate teambuilding event or a leadership training session. Phoenix's airport is just two hours away.

For those who may not make it as far as the Grand Canyon, Sedona offers its own smaller but incredibly beautiful Oak Creek Canyon, which sits within Coconino National Forest. The red-rock canyon gives visitors plenty to do, from hiking to fishing and swimming in Oak Creek. Slide Rock State

It is Sedona's more mystical elements, however, that set it apart. It's said that powerful vortexes in the area emit energy that has a positive effect on all who come in contact with it. Sedona is known as a place of spiritual healing where meditation and self-exploration enhance personal growth. Many visitors feel that Sedona is inspiring and rejuvenating, a place that's good for body, mind and spirit. Those elements may make it ideal for leadership sessions, which require self-reflection and openness to doing things in new ways. Life coaches, spiritual counselors and shamans are all on hand to offer their expertise. Whether one believes in the specifics of Sedona's mystique or not, there is no question that its incredible natural beauty will inspire anyone who visits.

Among Sedona's most inviting properties is aptly named Enchantment Resort, tucked into a red-rock canyon where the juxtaposition of grand geologic formations and luxury amenities wields a seductive power. It makes a planner's job easy — attendees need no coaxing to come here. Enchantment Resort's Meeting Village was designed with flow of space in mind. The Village Terrace is the centerpiece, situated perfectly for al fresco dining. Spanning 5,100 sf, the grand Anasazi Ballroom with adjacent foyer, boardroom and business services center is ideal for general sessions. And the Juniper House, a separate space replete with fireplace and exposed beam ceilings is a comfortable "war room" for event planners seeking both privacy and proximity. Ample breakout space is available opposite the terrace in the Agave and Ocotillo Ballrooms, along with the exquisitely designed Manzanita Executive Boardroom.

In addition to the award-winning spa and a golf course surrounded by 100,000 acres of Coconino National Forest, Enchantment offers a wealth of group activities, including rugged jeep tours, horseback riding, hot air ballooning, air tours of Sedona and the Grand Canyon, private train excursions, hiking and mountain biking, archeological site tours and more. ■



Credit: Enchantment Resort

The stunning view from Enchantment Resort's signature restaurant, Che-Ah-Chi, the Apache name for Boynton Canyon.

Park, within the canyon, is a must-visit for outdoor enthusiasts, kids and kids-at-heart. The famous natural slide on the creek was named by *USA Today* as one of the nation's 10 best swimming holes.

Arizona's Powerful Sense of Place

In total, Arizona is home to three national parks — Grand Canyon, Saguaro and Petrified Forest — and 14 national monuments, plus numerous national forests, recreation areas and historic sites. All are able to add immeasurably to a meeting experience by providing attendees with a deep sense of place via immersion in the powerful natural landscapes of the West.

As if that weren't enough for meeting planners to put Arizona at the top of their destination lists, Husom adds this: "Three hundred thirty sunny days a year, friendly locals, inspiring sunsets, vibrant nightlife, fine dining, wine bars, microbreweries, world-class resorts, historical properties, Western ranches, destination spas and the best Prickly Pear Margarita you will ever taste — those are just a few reasons for a planner to consider Arizona." **C&IT**

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