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THE #1 RATED SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

A cast of colorful
characters lights up
the Crescent City.

New Orleans

Colorful, Culturally Rich
Experiences Abound in the Big Easy

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INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

DECEMBER 2017

Vol. 24 No. 6



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An electric Duffy boat tours the Back Bay in Newport Beach, California.

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Groups can hold events at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter and other Universal Orlando theme parks.

Publisher's Message

Experience This!

The official meetings industry word of the year — or at least one of the most used or overused words — should be “experiential.” I think it’s become such a “thing” because attention spans have shortened in our ever more distractible world, and the under-35 crowd, especially passionate about notching life experiences, is demanding meetings with meaning. Planners have always been focused



on ROE — return on experience — it’s just that to achieve it nowadays, meetings and events have to be much more interactive and immersive. We’ve always known that a hands-on approach is what really sticks — remember the age-old Junior Achievement “learn by doing” model? Now, as always, rich, immersive experiences that resonate and compel full participation are naturally the most memorable and impactful.

Impactful destinations can set the stage — and the mood — for successful experiential meetings. And one of the most colorful is New Orleans, with its rich music — and especially its food — culture. Hosts New Orleans President

Terry Epton, CIS, CITE, DMCP, says in our cover story on page 44, “New Orleans was always a foodie destination, but what happened after Hurricane Katrina was a proliferation of new chefs and restaurants. We’ve always been an incubator for chefs who go on to other restaurants, and we’re at the top of the food chain now.” He acknowledges what every planner knows: “The food has to be good — if it isn’t, they won’t go to the event. They aren’t coming here to eat rubber chicken.” Jeanne Malone, CMP, director of meeting services with Million Dollar Round Table, agrees. “What draws us to return is that the city offers history, culture, incredible food, entertainment and shopping.” She adds one happy dilemma: “There are so many venues to select from, it’s always a challenge making a decision.”

Two other destinations in this issue that are constantly upping the ante on new experiences are Nevada (page 32) and Orlando (page 38). Planners tell us why they have become repeat customers of these meetings meccas. For even more destination inspiration, turn to “See It Like a Local” on page 18, where select CVBs highlight experiences that make their destinations unlike any other place.

Finally, all of this “experience” doesn’t come cheap: Read the enlightening Q&A on page 10 with FICP Executive Director Steve Bova, who says that high travel and other costs “put pressure on meeting professionals to deliver extraordinary experiences within a limited budget.” Therein lies the challenge, which also illustrates just why FICP changed the “P” in its name from “planners” to “professionals.”

Harvey Grotsky

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Puerto Rico Declares It Is Officially Open

SAN JUAN, PR — According to the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, Puerto Rico is open for tourism and business. More than 100 hotels and more than 4,000 restaurants are open and operating, and major tourism attractions Island-wide have been cleaned up and restored.

Major milestones include:

- All airports are fully operational.
- More than 75 percent of hotels are operational and taking reservations. Close to 60 cruise shore excursions are available.
- There are 107 operating tourist attractions across the Island, including major sites such as Old San Juan, the Castillo San Felipe del Morro, Cueva Ventana, among others.
- The restaurant industry leads with a total of 1,673 open restaurants in the San Juan area and thousands more across the Island.
- Ground transportation is operating as usual.

For more information, including details on open attractions, hotels, Puerto Rico's most popular restaurants and more, visit SeePuertoRico.com. And, for information on other Island updates (related to hospitals, ATMs, supermarkets, etc.), visit <http://status.pr/>.

SLS Baha Mar Now Open in The Bahamas

MIAMI, FL — The 299-room SLS Baha Mar hotel is now open within Baha Mar, the \$4.2 billion beachfront resort destination in Nassau with an elite collection of global luxury brands set along 3,000 feet of sparkling white sand beach and crystal clear waters.

SLS Baha Mar features 299 rooms and suites, an award-winning collection of culinary masterpieces, exciting nightlife venues, and captivating design and décor. Baha Mar's shared world-class amenities complete the luxe experience with guest access to the beach and shared pools, the Caribbean's largest casino, 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature-designed golf course, a flagship ESPA spa, and a wide variety of restaurants and lounges including Cleo, Monkey Bar



(the signature SLS lobby bar) and Bungalow Pool Bar & Grill. Looking ahead for the hotel, Privilege will open in December and Skybar will

follow in early 2018. On the Baha Mar Casino floor, Katsuya opened in mid-August, and Fi'lia by Chef Michael Schwartz, the James Beard Award winner, is slated for a mid-December opening.

Additionally, the nightlife concept Bond will debut at Baha Mar in mid-December with a grand opening on December 31st. Bond will be the place to be for New Year's Eve and beyond, offering late-night sizzle and cutting-edge entertainment as the see and be seen spot in the Bahamas.

SLS Baha Mar was brought to life by Dakota Development, she's real estate development subsidiary, and international interior design firm Avenue Interior Design. www.slsbahamar.com

Visit Mississippi Gulf Coast Announces New CEO

MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST, MS — The regional destination marketing organization charged with promoting tourism within Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties in Mississippi, recently announced Milton Segarra as its new CEO, beginning on January 8.



Segarra comes to the coast with more than three decades in tourism, corporate America and government experience, most recently as CEO of Meet Puerto Rico, the destination's convention and visitors bureau. While in Puerto Rico, he led a team of 29 and managed a budget of \$6.2 million. During his time there, the brand was reengineered, a new business model developed and a new digital marketing and social media campaign was implemented. Segarra is also a member of the board of directors of Destinations International, its finance committee and is a Certified Destination Management Executive, CDME.

"So much has been accomplished here, and I am excited to be part of the team that will move the brand forward and create even greater awareness of all there is to offer along our beautiful coast," Segarra said. www.gulfcoast.org

Hilton Announces Mexico Expansion



CANCUN, MEXICO — Hilton has announced plans to welcome the luxury Waldorf Astoria Cancun and the all-inclusive Hilton Cancun resort to the global hospitality company's growing portfolio in Mexico. Developed by Parks Hospitality and set to open in 2021, the neighboring properties will feature distinct characteristics and amenities across 100 acres of Caribbean beachfront.

The Waldorf Astoria Cancun will feature 150 guest rooms and suites, the signature Waldorf Astoria spa, state-of-the-art fitness facilities, two plunge pools and two exquisite dining experiences. The neighboring all-inclusive Hilton Cancun, which will offer 600 guest rooms, invites guests to experience curated adventures in local art, gastronomy and culture. The hotel also will feature six all-inclusive, unique culinary experiences. Both properties will offer expansive meeting and event space. www.hilton.com

Hilton to Roll Out Smart Hotel Rooms in 2018

MCLEAN, VA — Hilton has unveiled Connected Room, a first-of-its-kind, high-tech guest room that enables guests to personalize and control every aspect of their stay from one central point — their mobile device. Currently in beta testing, Connected Room is live in one hotel, will deploy in coming weeks in several more and will begin to scale rapidly to hotels across the United States in 2018.

Guests who stay at Connected Room-enabled properties soon will be able to use the Hilton Honors app to manage most things they would traditionally do manually in a room, from controlling the temperature and lighting to the TV and window coverings. Guests also will be able to personalize their room with technology that loads the most popular streaming media and other accounts to in-room TVs.

In the longer-term, Connected Room will support a range of connected devices, engagements and experiences. Guests will be able to use voice commands to control their room or access their content, and to upload their own artwork and photos to automatically display in their room. Guests also will be able to set various preferences in their Hilton Honors account profile to further customize their in-room experience to their individual preferences. www.hilton.com

Caesars to Develop \$375 Million Conference Center in Las Vegas



LAS VEGAS, NV — Caesars Entertainment Corporation has announced plans to develop a 550,000-sf conference center in Las Vegas, named Caesars Forum, featuring the two largest pillarless ballrooms in North America.

The cost of the conference center is estimated to be approximately \$375 million. When completed, it will feature 300,000 sf of flexible meeting space, equivalent to more than five football fields, and will be located east of the Las Vegas Strip with bridge connections to Harrah's, Linq and the Linq Promenade.

As part of a series of transactions with VICI Properties, Caesars Entertainment recently announced its intention to acquire 18.4 acres of land as part of its plans to develop this new conference center.

Scheduled to officially open in 2020, Caesars expects to break ground on Caesars Forum early in the second quarter of 2018. Friedmutter Group and Penta Building Group have been awarded as the architect and general contractor, respectively. www.caesarsmeansbusiness.com

Margaritaville Nashville Hotel Breaks Ground

NASHVILLE, TN — Margaritaville Nashville Hotel, a new-build hotel perfectly positioned in Nashville's thriving "SoBro" district, recently celebrated its groundbreaking with representatives from Safe Harbor Development and Margaritaville Holdings, as well as local members of the tourism industry.

"The groundbreaking of Margaritaville Nashville Hotel marks the arrival of an entirely unique vacation concept for the area, combining a metropolitan latitude with Margaritaville's island attitude," said Darby

Campbell, owner and president of Safe Harbor Development, which is developing the property. "We couldn't be happier to be on our way to welcoming visitors at what will be a true urban escape in the heart of Music City."

Centrally located just steps from the Music City Center at the corner of 5th Ave. S and Peabody St., Margaritaville Nashville Hotel will feature 217 guest rooms; 52 Margaritaville Vacation Club by Wyndham timeshare units; a rooftop relaxation and entertainment area with a pool,



sundeck, firepits and live entertainment; a fitness center; more than 10,000 sf of function space; a Starbucks coffee shop; and two new Margaritaville dining concepts — Fins Beach Bar and JWB Grill. The property is anticipated to open in summer 2019 and will be the first Margaritaville Hotel in a metropolitan area. www.margaritavillehotelnashville.com

Wyndham Launches Newest Dual-Brand Concept in Miami

PARSIPPANY, NJ — Wyndham Hotel Group has announced the signing of the largest hotel development in the Brickell district of Miami to its managed hotel portfolio: a new 445-room, dual-branded hotel leveraging a never-before-seen combination of the Wyndham Grand and Tryp by Wyndham brands.

The combination of brands celebrates Miami's distinct spirit — both the upper-upscale Wyndham Grand brand and select-service, lifestyle Tryp by Wyndham brands embrace the charm and character of the local destination — incorporating Miami style into each brand's unique elements and enabling travelers to stay the way they want in one of the most diverse cities in the world.

Owned by Brazilian developer Galwan and designed by award-winning firm Arquitectonica, the agreement comprises 445 guest rooms in Miami's trendy Brickell neighborhood. The hotel, expected to open in late 2019, is the first U.S. development for Galwan, one of the largest residential and hotel developers in Brazil.

The 41-story hotel will offer 200 rooms under Wyndham Grand and 245 rooms under Tryp by Wyndham, including the brand's signature family rooms with extra space and bunk beds for kids. The hotels share a lobby and lounge space on the first floor, an eight-story parking garage, a pool deck, a fitness center and 8,000 sf of meeting space including a library, boardroom and flexible event spaces. The hotel's rooftop will feature a three-meal restaurant and bar inspired by the Tryp brand's Mediterranean roots. www.wyndhamrewards.com

Resorts Casino Hotel Updates Ocean Tower Guest Rooms

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — All 480 rooms in the Ocean Tower have been renovated at Resorts Casino Hotel, a Mohegan Sun property in Atlantic City, including 112 junior suites, 14 parlor suites and one presidential suite. The recently completed update is part of approximately \$100 million that was earmarked for expansion and renovation of the hotel, which included \$35 million spent on the Jimmy Buffett-themed Margaritaville entertainment complex and a state-of-the-art conference center, which opened in 2015.

The \$25 million investment in newly renovated deluxe rooms is inspired by a tropical fun theme and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville with sand-inspired carpets, coral patterns and tropical dark woods. The rooms include free in-room Wi-Fi, LCD televisions, a refrigerator, laptop-sized safe, iron and ironing board, and coffee/tea maker. Connecting rooms are also available.

Aptly named for its close proximity to the beach and Boardwalk, the Ocean Tower has been a favorite of Resorts' guests since the property opened as Atlantic City's first casino in 1978. It offers spectacular views of the Atlantic Ocean, beach, the world-famous Boardwalk and the back bays of the Atlantic City region. www.meetatresorts.com



IRF Releases Second Report on Biometric Experiment

MCLEAN, VA — The Incentive Research Foundation has released Reward Presentation and Attraction: A Biometric Experiment. The second report detailing the findings from the IRF's first-of-a-kind biometric experiment examines how people prefer to receive recognition and rewards. The study explores different drivers of award presentation preferences and suggests ways of determining effective approaches to make the presentation impactful on the recipient.

"This study provides new and deeper insight into reward-earner preference — at both the conscious and unconscious levels — in the presentation of rewards and recognition," said Melissa Van Dyke, IRF president. "Some people prefer a great deal of pomp and ceremony when they are recognized, while others prefer just a verbal or written note of appreciation along with the reward that accompanies it. Ultimately, our results demonstrate a highly individualized range of preference."

The experiment supports the large body of research that suggests at least some form of public recognition is important to all reward earners. It also adds new evidence that smaller presentations may be more effective and meaningful than big, company-wide events for most people.

While visible indicators such as age, gender and job type are typically used to base assumptions on what people might want, the results reveal new, invisible indicators that are strikingly important in customizing effective reward presentation strategies.

To view or download a copy of Reward Presentation and Attraction: A Biometric Experiment, please visit <http://theirf.org/research/reward-presentation-and-attraction-a-biometric-experiment/2348/>.

JW Marriott Nashville Tops Out

NASHVILLE, TN — The JW Marriott Nashville, scheduled to open summer 2018, has reached its height — 386 feet — in the Music City skyline. Sitting on one of the highest elevation points in Nashville, the construction milestone moment was celebrated with a topping out ceremony.

The JW Marriott Nashville will feature 533 guest rooms and suites, 50,000 sf of meeting space, a trio of award-winning restaurants, including Michael Mina's Bourbon Steak, a full-service Spa by JW, a heated rooftop pool and a state-of-the-art fitness center. The hotel's distinctive elliptical shape, conceptualized by esteemed architecture firm Arquitectonica, and its stunning and sleek interior, created by design firm Stonehill & Taylor, embodies the creative spirit of Nashville while exuding the approachable luxury of the renowned JW Marriott brand. www.jwmarriottnashville.com



Hilton Denver City Center Unveils Reno

DENVER, CO — Denver community leaders gathered to celebrate the opening of Hilton's newest hotel, Hilton Denver City Center. The ribbon-cutting ceremony introduced the 613-room hotel, which stands 20-stories high and features newly renovated public spaces, guest rooms and dining venues following the completion of a \$27 million multiphased renovation.

Towering above the Mile High City, Hilton Denver City Center offers breathtaking views of the Rocky Mountains and city skyline, and is conveniently located near main downtown attractions including the Colorado Convention Center, 16th Street Mall, Pepsi Center, Sports Authority Field and Denver Art Museum. The hotel has 581 guest rooms and 32 suites, and expansive, flexible event space ideal for conferences and receptions. www.hilton.com

IACC 'Meeting Room of the Future' Update

THE WOODLANDS, TX — The latest report from the groundbreaking IACC Meeting Room of the Future shows that meeting planners and conferees now have specific, rapidly evolving goals and great expectations. Consequently, the IACC Meeting Room of the Future project will continue in its research efforts for the foreseeable future. The project is designed to transform the meeting experience through a global collaboration of leaders in conference space design, audio-visual technology, hospitality, academia and conference management. One-hundred-fifty thought leaders were surveyed for the 2017 report, and participants spanned executives in government, corporations and associations. Says Ellen Sinclair, Benchmark S.V.P. operations, and chair of the Meeting Room of the Future initiative, "Our goal was to build a meeting room of the future, but we soon realized that meeting spaces are no longer confined to a room. Thanks to mobile technology, a meeting room can be in a park, on a beach, in an art studio or other inspiring site. There will always be a need for a sophisticated, technically advanced meeting space, but the idea of what constitutes a meeting room has vastly changed in a very short space of time." Benchmark partnered with IACC on the Meeting Room of the Future beginning in 2015. www.iacconline.org/iacc-meeting-room-of-the-future, www.benchmarkglobalhospitality.com



With FICP Executive Director Steve Bova

Reflections on the State of the Industry and a Look to 2018

During the FICP 2017 Annual Conference, which took place in San Diego on November 12-15, we asked Executive Director Steve Bova, CAE, to weigh in on a variety of important issues of interest to financial and insurance industry meeting professionals, from regulatory and other challenges to trends for the coming year.

Q. FICP members recently voted to change the name of the organization. Why was this change so important?

A. When FICP announced its new mission and vision a year ago, the intention was to raise the bar for the association so that it could position its meeting professional members as thought leaders to the entire meetings and events industry. FICP also wanted to position members as professionals within their companies. It only made sense that, if we are to play a role in elevating the stature of the profession, the association positions itself as a community of professionals. While the change may appear to be subtle, it is important and has been very well received by the membership as well as the industry we serve.

Q. How are financial services and insurance industry meetings and sales incen-

tives affected by regulatory challenges, such as the Fiduciary Rule?

A. There has been a wide spectrum of responses based on each company's perspective about the rule. Some have made no changes, some have made a few changes, and some have made significant changes. Action seems to be dependent upon a company's business model and appetite for risk.

The Department of Labor has officially delayed by 18 months the January 1, 2018 implementation date of the Conflict of Interest Rule. This means that the Best Interest Contract, and the other disclosure obligations, will not be effective until July 1, 2019. This latest development does not change the impartial conduct standard that took effect June 9, 2017. Stay tuned as we continue to navigate the uncertainty around the rule.

Q. What other major challenges are financial and insurance meeting professionals facing today?

A. The most important challenges we are hearing from members are that increasing travel costs are making it more challenging to continue to deliver exceptional events. The issue of safety and security is now on everyone's radar, and

the related costs further the challenges borne by the increased travel costs. Technology is not always inexpensive. At the same time, investments need to be made in order to stay on the cutting edge, be easy to do business with and remain relevant. Together, these additional expenses put pressure on meeting professionals to deliver extraordinary experiences within a limited budget.

What's more, factor in the importance of diversity and inclusiveness as well as addressing multigenerational challenges in meetings and events. Both meeting professionals as well as the end customers (brokers and dealers) are impacted in various ways by the evolving nature of the world. It's no wonder that continued professional development is so necessary and that the importance of the meeting professional getting a seat at the table is more important than ever!

Q. Are the number and length of meetings increasing or decreasing? Do you see any swing away from the seller's market? What about lead times?

A. One of the key takeaways of the first FICP Pulse Survey (Q2) earlier this year was that many meeting professionals were being tasked with more work in

less time — meetings were getting bigger and the number of meetings was increasing, while the lead time was also getting shorter. Fortunately, the results of FICP's just-released Q3 Pulse Survey show that these conditions are improving for many of those same professionals, and that meeting professionals at nearly all of their companies influence executive decision-making.

For hospitality partners, their business outlook remains strong and signs continue for the seller's market — at least for the near future. Demand continues to surpass supply, and new builds are not focusing on the big boxes that have the meeting space that planners are seeking. Of course, markets operate in cycles and nothing lasts forever.

Q. What encouraging signs do you see ahead for the U.S. and global meetings industry?

A. We reside within a powerful, relevant and dynamic industry. Meetings matter more than ever. Humans have an innate need to meet face-to-face that is not bound exclusively by economic, geographic, safety or security factors. While these and other issues may impact our ability to meet from time to time, the big picture is that our industry meets a basic human need. It's pretty encouraging to know that what we do as an industry bonds people in many ways, fosters communication, builds knowledge and confidence, and enables us to recognize, reward and retain our most productive and valued people.

Nicholas P. Sargen, chief economist and investment strategist for Fort Washington Investment Advisors, is bullish about the overall global economy. During the FICP Annual Conference in November, he made the case for continued optimism in the financial and insurance niche. Specifically, within the United States, there is high consumer and business confidence, solid job growth, synchronized global expansion, rebounding corporate profits, and low inflation and interest rates. At the same time, growth of the labor force has slowed, immigration is being curtailed, labor productivity has slowed, and the budget deficit is set to widen significantly.

Sargen concluded his remarks by sharing *the good*: tax and regulatory reform; *the bad*: outsized deficits and rising interest rates; and *the ugly*: a trade war or spread of populism globally.

Q. What in your opinion are the biggest trends and areas of change financial and insurance industry meetings will face in the coming year?

A. I would like to say that 2018 will be a breakthrough year for meeting professionals representing all industries and especially those in the financial and insurance sector. What does ultimate success look like?

More corporate executives would fully recognize and appreciate meeting professionals as integral strategic resources within their companies, rather than someone to administrate an expense line or function. Meeting professionals would earn the trust and admiration of these executives by demonstrating their strategic value to the company in addition to being creative event organizers, reliable taskmasters and valued generalists. The game is changing and the importance of the meeting professional has never been greater.

The reality is that unfortunate and unexpected events will continue to happen anytime and anywhere. This presents an opportunity for meeting professionals to demonstrate their expertise and bring value to the table. What will resonate most with corporate executives? There is an increasing need for corporate events to be as safe and secure as possible. Meeting professionals play a critical role in preparing for crises and mitigating situations when they arise. When valued organizational assets gather in one place, the potential for danger is omnipresent. There is no more important role for a meeting professional than to provide confidence that the company has taken every possible measure to ensure the safety and wellness of its people. That's why meeting professionals need to be at the table, in the loop and contributing to the important conversations that are taking place within their companies. **I&FMM**

FICP Annual Conference

Q. How and why was the 2017 Annual Conference different?

A. I'm glad you asked, because FICP strives each year to provide a unique experience for its attendees — not necessarily better, but different from the perspective that the association is always showcasing innovative approaches and techniques that meetings professionals can implement. FICP is an incubator of ideas for those who plan meetings; everything we do — from registration to evaluation and everything in between — is intended to provide a learning experience.

Q. What are the key takeaways you hope planners experienced?

A. Each attendee has his or her own goals or personal experiences. The overarching objective is to create an environment for meeting professionals and hospitality partners to meet, form relationships, discuss business and share, as well as provide the tools for them to continue to develop in their careers and demonstrate their impact at their companies.

Q. What new, ongoing educational opportunities did FICP offer its members at the conference?

A. The Education Committee aims to provide a variety of effective adult learning techniques to maximize attendee engagement and knowledge-building. In addition to the traditional keynote and breakout sessions, FICP hosted facilitated idea exchange sessions, a speaker showcase and a new Experience Zone where attendees could interact with a variety of different tools, including a tech bar with LinkedIn experts, a Huddlewall screen (a type of electronic white board) that captured notes from sessions, and a campfire setting in the round where attendees could connect through intimate, short, expert-facilitated discussions.

To attract traffic, the Experience Zone had a photo booth and offered customized ice cream treats. "These are things you might not normally see at a conference," said Lydia Kamicar, FICP's director of education. "When we see people taking pictures of the experiences we provide, it means they are taking away ideas and everyone wins," she said.

See FICP Annual Conference snapshots on the following pages.



2017 FICP Annual Conference Snapshots

The FICP Annual Conference on November 12–15 drew more than 700 attendees to the Manchester Grand Hyatt in sunny San Diego, California, reflecting the conference theme of “Endless Summer, Endless Impact.” The gathering had much to celebrate, marking FICP’s 60th anniversary, a new mission, vision and brand statement, a new name — putting the focus on “professionals” in Financial & Insurance Conference Professionals — and a new website. Among the many networking opportunities was a guided walk to the USS Midway aircraft carrier museum.



Meeting Trends

By Pádraic Gilligan



2018 Industry Outlook: Finance and Insurance Still Strong on Incentives

Through the SITE Foundation, The Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) commissions research each year around the use of incentive travel as a performance improvement tool for global businesses. What emerges is a “state of the industry” report on incentives — which sectors are using them, how much is being invested per person for incentive programs, whether overall budgets

spread, other key features of the survey were the relative maturity and tenure of respondents whose ages across all categories averaged 49 years and nearly 20 years of industry experience.

Of the respondents, around one-third were buyers of incentive travel experiences, i.e. corporate planners or incentive agencies that create and deliver incentive travel experiences. The other two-thirds were suppliers such as destination management companies (DMCs), hotels, venues and service providers based in the destination where the incentive is being delivered. Of the corporate buyers, the largest number of respondents were from the finance and insurance sector, with science and technology, travel and tourism, pharma and direct selling also represented. Conspicuous by their absence were respondents from the automotive sector, traditionally a big user of incentive travel experiences.

So What Did We Learn?

Rumors of the demise of incentives are greatly exaggerated! A headline from this year’s Index was definitely the dramatic increase in per person investment for incentives, with overall average increases from \$3,000 per person in 2016 to \$4,000 per person in 2017. Drilling down into the responses, this figure is even more dramatic for the corporate sector, with a year-over-year increase of \$1,900 per person.

Dramatically increasing per-person spend to create an unforgettable incentive travel experience, however, doesn’t mean you don’t seek to control and contain costs. The survey results clearly demonstrate that buyers, more than ever, are focused on cost containment and intent on extrapolating maximum value from every dollar invested.

For corporate buyers, this has led primarily to the selection of less expensive destinations as well as less expensive

are up or down, where in the world are incentives traveling to, and so on.

Preliminary results from SITE Index 2018, released in October at IMEX America, makes for compelling reading, particularly for the finance and insurance sector which, at 22 percent, represented the single biggest category of corporate buyer respondents. The survey was conducted in July/August of 2017 and received just under 600 responses from 72 countries with around 150 of the respondents located in North America. Besides the strong global



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Meeting Trends

amenities, perhaps the most “peripheral” aspect of the overall incentive experience. At the same time, sellers of incentive travel services are attempting to add value through greater creativity/innovative event design.

Even with the more intense focus on budgets, the average length of stay increased both for programs with any travel time and for programs requiring more than three hours of travel time. This may indicate a trend toward more elite programs with fewer qualifiers given even more extraordinary experiences in exchange for their exceptional performance.

While air transportation still comprises nearly a quarter

Rumors of the demise
of incentives are
greatly exaggerated!

of the budget, investments in technology are increasing in the development and deployment of programs — whether for communications, budgeting or operations, such as program apps, personalized digital communications, data tracking and measurement tools.

Overall Sentiment

At the moment, optimism is high for incentive travel, despite world events such as natural disasters and terrorism that have rocked the industry this year. Although safety remains a top concern, it has decreased since 2016 and does not appear to be a deterrent to a strong incentive market.

Interestingly, despite rumblings in 2016 and 2017 that government regulations could massively impact incentives in the finance and insurance sector, corporate respondents are not seeing any need for radical change and remain bullish in relation to the future of incentives and their effectiveness.

Buyers of incentive programs universally believe them to be strong motivators of performance, with increased company sales and profitability remaining the most important business objective, followed by improved employee engagement. There is also a slight increase in the measure-

ment of incentive programs, driven by one-third of corporate users reporting they “almost always, or always” track return on investment (ROI) or return on objective (ROO) — up from 23 percent in 2016.

And, as many companies are embracing social responsibility and sustainability, that trend shows up as a significant one in the survey. Both buyers and sellers reported that sustainability and “being green” are having the most positive impact on incentive travel. This correlates to the finding that a large majority of incentive travel programs now include at least one corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity.

Participant Appeal Tops Destination Selection

New to this year’s survey were questions about what influences destination selection. Survey respondents ranked seven criteria for selecting one destination over another for incentive travel programs, and destination appeal topped the list. For corporate buyers, overall safety and destination infrastructure ranked second and third, whereas access from participants’ city or origin — a key criteria when selecting a destination for a meeting or conference — came in at fifth place. Clearly destinations seeking to grow their market share in the lucrative incentive sector must tell a convincing story around desirability and appeal.

The immense power and benefit of industry associations such as SITE, FICP, PCMA and MPI are proven by “recommendations from fellow members of trade associations” ranking first on what most influences destination choice. Clearly members of industry associations place immense trust in their fellow members to provide an honest steer around what destinations are likely to work.

When it comes to learning about a destination, a large majority of buyers said that familiarization trips are most effective, followed by industry trade shows. And, when asked what is essential to a good destination experience, culture and sightseeing, followed by dining and teambuilding were ranked as most important.

To learn more about incentive travel insights and trends, go to motivate.siteglobal.com.

I&FMM

Pádraic Gilligan and his colleagues Patrick Delaney and Aoife McCrum run SoolNua, a specialist agency working with destinations, hotels and venues on strategy, marketing and training in the MICE sector. A former global president of SITE, Pádraic currently serves as vice president, research and content for the SITE Foundation. www.siteglobal.com

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See It LIKE A Local

CVBs Have the Inside Scoop on Memorable Destination Experiences

Meetings give people a chance to learn and network with their colleagues, but they also provide an opportunity to visit new destinations and learn about the things that make them exciting and different. There's no better way to capture the flavor of a community than to work with the local convention and visitors bureau. They know their cities inside and out, and can offer insights that are hard to gain even through extensive online searches. Here are examples of CVBs that have worked with companies to plan unforgettable experiences for attendees.

By Sophia Bennett

Newport Beach, California

The best of natural and man-made wonders combine in Newport Beach, which is about an hour south of Los Angeles. The community sits on Back Bay, which is bordered by an 800-acre nature preserve with beautiful beaches and one of the few remaining estuaries in Southern California. It's home to many celebrities and wealthy individuals, which means there are hundreds of eye-popping homes, outstanding shopping and great golf courses.

"The thing planners want to expose their attendees to is the aspirational

lifestyle in Newport Beach," says Michelle Donahue, senior vice president of sales for Visit Newport Beach. Her organization has plenty of ways to do that through relaxing, enjoyable excursions.

Many groups enjoy renting low-speed, easy-to-drive electric Duffy boats for tours or teambuilding exercises in Back Bay. "It's a great, accessible way to get on this phenomenal harbor and look at these multimillion-dollar homes," Donahue says. When they're done, groups can dock and enjoy one of the waterfront's many restaurants.

Groups also can rent yachts through Hornblower Cruises for parties, dinners

and other functions. One of the ships is the Wild Goose, which was once owned by John Wayne. Traces of the famous actor and his family are still everywhere on the ship, Donahue notes. "The staterooms are exactly as he left them. One room has a library with his poker table. Their bedding and paintings are still in the ship. In the staterooms for the kids you can see where they've carved their initials in the headboards."

The harbor and surrounds also can be enjoyed by foot, bike or electric bike. Many groups take the boardwalk

Electric Duffy boats tour the Back Bay of Newport Beach, California.

It doesn't get much more inspirational than Sedona's breathtaking red rock country.





Groups visiting Jacksonville can walk the Ale Trail to sample the city's hopping craft beer scene or head to Jacksonville Beach to try out watersports.

through Laguna Beach and other local cities, then have a catered picnic at a park. Whales swim along the nearby shoreline, and more than 200 bird and animal species call the estuary home, so there are plenty of chances to nature-watch. Or arrange for helicopter tours, which provide views of celebrity homes and the breathtaking scenery.

Jacksonville, Florida

Jacksonville is Florida's youngest city population-wise, and it's also one of its hippest. The Northeast Florida city is known for its extensive beaches (22 miles of beaches), a large park system with myriad opportunities for eco-adventures, rich cultural and educational opportunities, one of the state's best craft beer scenes, and great nightlife. "Jacksonville is home to 160 hotels and resorts, offering planners a variety of choices including oceanfront boutique resorts, modern suburban hotels and elegant riverfront convention hotels," says Monica R. Smith, CMP, CASE, CDME, vice president, sales and services with Visit Jacksonville. "A variety of mortgage banking firms, financial technology firms and financial institutions are either headquartered or have a large presence in Jacksonville," which means meeting attendees will feel right at home.

Smith has a long list of activities planners might consider for offsite events or incentive trips. One popular activity is a dine-around at local museums, where each course is served at a different museum. The Cummer Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art and Museum of Science and History are regular partici-

pants. Meeting attendees can tour local breweries or walk the seven destinations on the local Ale Trail.

To enjoy Jacksonville's beaches and other outdoor destinations, groups can take bike tours of local historic neighborhoods, hire an instructor for surfing and paddleboard lessons, fly over the community and ocean in a helicopter, or go charter fishing or sailing.

"Jacksonville is an affordable destination, offering some of the most competitive rates in Florida, while continuing to provide an exceptional experience," says Smith. "The busiest time of the year in Jacksonville is during major sporting events, which include the Florida-Georgia football weekend in October, The Players Championship golf tournament in May and the Tax Slayer Bowl in late December. However, with more

than 18,000 rooms, Jacksonville can accommodate groups year-round during all seasons."

Salt Lake City, Utah

The towering mountains that surround Salt Lake City provide ample recreational opportunities and breathtaking scenery. Visitors will find plenty to do in this clean, safe and affordable Southwest city. Among unique attractions (the Mormon Temple, surrounding Temple Square and Utah Olympic Park included), winter and summer sports, and great dining and shopping, there's something for everyone to enjoy.

Julie Rhoads, director of convention services for Visit Salt Lake, has a few ideas about exciting activities for incentive trips. The nearby Snowbird Ski Resort has a tram that travels to



Salt Lake City meetings can include a trip to Snowbird Ski Resort where a tram takes visitors to The Summit restaurant at an elevation of 11,000 feet atop Hidden Peak.

the 11,000-foot high Hidden Peak in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. Depending on the season, guests can look at wildflowers, search out animals and enjoy the majestic views. Take champagne and snacks on the tram ride or enjoy a meal at The Summit restaurant on top of the peak.

Visit Salt Lake recently worked with a company to plan a memorable party for guests attending a conference. They arranged a private picnic at Red Butte Garden, a large botanical garden and arboretum. After picnicking on the lawn around the amphitheater, guests heard a performance by a popular local band.

At another event, Visit Salt Lake helped event organizers plan a Sundance Film Festival-themed party at the Grand American Hotel. When guests arrived, trailers from movies first shown at Sundance were playing on large screens around the venue. The food and drinks harkened back to popular movies such as "Pulp Fiction." A DJ played music for dancing, taking a break only for a live performance by the Bacon Brothers.

The Palm Beaches, Florida

Palm Beach County includes 39 diverse cities and towns that span more than 2,200 square miles and provide 47 miles of pristine beachfront lined with hotels, restaurants and opportunities for outdoor excursions. It's a warm-weather destination with plenty to offer event planners, including a wealth of exciting incentive travel or offsite event experiences.



Credit: Discover the Palm Beaches



Visitors can become part of a Super Bowl celebration at The NFL Experience Times Square.

Staff at Discover the Palm Beaches recently helped arrange a trip that started with a catamaran boat ride through the Lake Worth Lagoon. The boat then ventured into the ocean, where everyone went fishing. After the boat ride, the group was taken to The Boca Beach Club for an evening by the pool and beach. For entertainment, guests were invited to take part in interactive glow games.

A separate group chose to take an Island Living bike tour, where a guide shared fun facts and stories about Palm Beach Island. Another trip involved a tour of Harbourside Place in Jupiter, a waterfront shopping and dining destination, followed by a boat ride to uTiki Beach, a popular restaurant on the Jupiter Inlet that serves Caribbean food and

drinks. The Woods restaurant, owned by golf legend Tiger Woods, who lives on nearby Jupiter Island, is also at Harbourside, as is the Wyndham Grand Jupiter.

The CVB also helped the group add a CSR component to their meeting. "Discover the Palm Beaches' meetings and incentives team held a CSR project where they collected travel sized toiletries from the group and created hygiene kits for in-county communities affected by Hurricane Irma," says Kelly Cavers, the company's senior vice president, group sales. They're happy to work with other groups on similar events.

New York, New York

There's no place in the world quite like New York. For event participants



Among experiences in Palm Beach County is Harbourside Place in Jupiter (left). Discover the Palm Beaches organized a hurricane relief CSR project (above) for one group.



Among the many landmarks in Washington, DC, that can host private events is the National Cathedral. Destination DC helped one company plan a dinner in the cathedral's nave.

who enjoy the hustle and bustle of an urban area, there are countless ways to find unique experiences in one of the world's greatest cities.

Rachel Peace, communications manager with NYC & Company, shares several offsite event ideas. Her organization recently arranged for a corporate group to take cooking classes at the Institute of Culinary Education. The package included gnocchi-making and a wine and chocolate tasting. Another group participated in a chocolate-making team-building exercise at Voila Chocolat on the Upper West Side. Restaurant Le Pain Quotidien does pizza-making classes, and eatery Black Barn provides cooking classes and knife skills demonstrations.

For the athletically inclined, Spin NYC is a ping-pong bar where people can show off their paddling skills in between noshing on snacks and drinks. NYC & Company recently helped a group of 100 host a reception there. The Fishbowl at Dream Midtown provides mini bowling, skeeball, a built-in photo booth and a fun atmosphere for parties. The NFL Experience Times Square, which opened in November, gives fan an interactive look at their favorite sport.

Sedona, Arizona

Rural Sedona is another destination that provides a blend of breathtaking scenery and many modern conveniences. The Arizona community is known for its red rocks, which can be viewed along numerous hiking and biking trails as

well as from many of the community's meeting facilities. In addition to great opportunities for outdoor adventure, expect to find great arts and culture and luxurious spas and resorts.

"The Sedona Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau is launching Sedona's Secret 7, an innovative campaign that reveals hidden trails and locations across Red Rock Country," says sales manager Leslie Brearley. "Sedona's Secret 7 is broken down into seven categories: picnics, sunrise and sunset vistas, stargazing, spiritual, arts and culture, biking trails and hiking trails. Within each category there are seven different places that offer a doorway to lesser known parts of Sedona. These hidden



Albuquerque, home to the International Balloon Museum, is the perfect destination to experience a most memorable hot-air balloon ride.

gems allow visitors the opportunity to create a one-of-a-kind itinerary based on their interests."

For those more interested in arts and culture, Sedona is home to more than 80 art galleries and shops. The CVB and local hotels offer art walk maps that detail fun routes in different areas of town.

Washington, DC

"Washington, DC is home to world-class meeting spaces, exceptional venues and a dining scene packed with culinary talent, not to mention the country's finest monuments and memorials and captivating museums," says Melissa Riley, vice president, convention sales and services at Destination DC. "We're lucky to have a recognizable skyline and special events spaces with city views."

The CVB recently helped a company plan a dinner for senior stakeholders in the nave of the National Cathedral. Uplighting gave the stained glass windows a beautiful glow. Destination DC can arrange after-hours tours of the U.S. Capitol, then connect guests to the Library of Congress via underground tunnels for special events. The National Archives is another memorable venue for meetings. Cultural attractions such as the National Air and Space Museum or Newseum can hold concerts and other large gatherings.

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International CVBs Also Deliver

Domestic CVBs aren't the only places to turn when you need a fantastic experience for a meeting or incentive trip. Exotic international locales can also offer unique and exciting opportunities.

Fiji

Fiji is hard to beat when it comes to giving guests a truly out-of-this-world experience. The island chain has a range of accommodations, including hotels, resorts and "bure" — thatched-roof cottages based on traditional village homes. The beaches are enough to keep most guests busy, but there are plenty of other things to do.

"Fiji's diverse natural landscape presents a variety of unique teambuilding experiences that help delegates connect with each other and with the character, heritage and geography of Fiji," says Jonathan Reap, public relations manager, North America with Tourism Fiji. "Local Fijian cuisine master classes, village visits and kava ceremonies with the village chief, or taking over an uninhabited island where you can ship in guests to lounge in pop-up cabanas on endless sandy beaches are among the favorites."



A sailing expedition in Auckland Harbor.

A recent group welcomed 85 guests to Fiji for a conference followed by an afternoon of golf; water activities such as snorkeling, paddleboarding and kayaking; a barbecue lunch; and a four-course dinner served poolside.

Participants were encouraged to bring a guest, and the partners had a full slate of activities as well. One day they visit a local school, where the children shared stories of school life in Fiji and treated guests to a choir performance and morning tea. On another day they had a spa experience then competed in a Master Chef competition.

Fiji's rainy season typically lasts from the end of November through February. The islands are particularly busy when Australian and New Zealand schools are on break. Both may be times to avoid if you want nothing but sun and empty beaches.

New Zealand

New Zealand offers a diverse and beautiful landscape, outdoor activities that range from relaxing to daring, amazing food and wine, and exciting cultural attractions. Because the island nation is so small, it's easy to participate in a number of experiences in a short amount of time, says Gabrielle Boyd with Tourism New Zealand.

Boating is a common pastime in New Zealand. Sail on a luxury yacht to Waiheke Island in Auckland, or set up a friendly competition where event attendees can race each other in former America's Cup yachts. Smaller boats can be chartered for fishing, whale-watching or a trip to Mt. Aspiring National Park, a World Heritage site.

Learn about the culture of New Zealand by staying overnight at a Maori meeting house, visiting a tribe for dinner and a dance performance, or checking out one of the local museums. Tourism New Zealand also can help arrange adventure trips in Queenstown. One sample itinerary includes bungee-jumping off the Kawarau Bridge, a helicopter ride over the mountains and a jetboat trip up the Dart River.

The best times to visit New Zealand are the shoulder seasons from October to November and April to May. "Easter is also a big holiday in New Zealand, so that is a time period to avoid," Boyd advises.

— SB

great value in meetings over the summer or winter, or when Congress is not in session," Riley says.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Though it may seem like an out-of-the-way destination to some, there are few places in the continental United States that are more exotic than Albuquerque. New Mexico's largest city is rich in history, art and culture, interesting architecture, good food and drinks, and quality entertainment. The airport is less than 10 minutes from downtown

and has flights from over two dozen major cities.

Notable event venues include the Albuquerque Museum, Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum, Indian Pueblo Cultural Center and National Hispanic Cultural Center. Should you need entertainment beyond the exhibits these venues offer, book intimate flamenco performances, traditional Native American dancers, talented mariachi bands and more. Outside of these venues, take guests on ghost tours, scavenger hunts through Old Town, tours of

the many attractions along Route 66, hot-air balloon rides or hikes through the nearby national monuments.

"The food scene in Albuquerque is truly a microcosm of the city's melting pot of cultures," says Kristin McGrath, vice president of convention sales, services and sports for Visit Albuquerque. "Aside from the famous chile peppers that form the basis of traditional New Mexican cuisine, visitors can experience everything from Native American fusion and fine French fare to Asian delights and dinner classics."

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Winning Golf Programs

Golf Pros and Planners Share Their Secrets of Success

By Keith Loria

Spending a beautiful day on the links playing a round of golf has long been a great business tool. And in today's busy world, where it's tough for companies to find extended periods of time to meet with business partners and clients, organizing a corporate golf event is a great way to solve that problem.

After all, golf provides a great avenue for conversation in a relaxed environment, and when a corporate outing is set up correctly, it can be fun and competitive for everyone.

Corporate golf programs can be sponsored tournaments, incentive-driven or coordinated with a company meeting. Most resorts offer a wide array of options for groups, including tournaments and competi-

tions, as well as clinics and lessons for groups or individuals. Some contests that are often included in corporate golf events include closest to the hole, straightest drive, longest drive and best putt.

A symbiotic relationship between a company's meeting planner and the golf director at a resort is the key to a smooth golf program for a corporate group.

"It is the job of the corporate group planner to put together a great program for their company/client, and it is our golf program team's job to ensure that we live up to the expectation," says Craig Allan, Golf Performance Center manager at Sea Island Resort in Sea Island, Georgia. "We are very confident in the wonderful

"We pride ourselves on providing unique programs individually catered to each group so that year after year our clients are surprised, wowed and excited by what they experience."

Craig Allan, Golf Performance Center Manager
Sea Island Resort, Sea Island, GA



Craig Allan (second from right) coaches a club-fitting session.

golf programs we put together with our group golf professional who has years of experience, is always open to new ideas and is very detailed orientated."

Carrie Ruiz, director of golf and travel industry sales for Trump National Doral Miami, says when planning an event, a planner must provide the resort team and golf course with as much information about the goals of the outing or program as possible.

"They are the experts and can truly help a planner create the best day possible for the golfers," she says. "Is it strictly leisure play? Teambuilding? Or are we giving golfers the opportunity to bond and build relationships with clients? The resort team and golf staff can set up the proper format for the day to ensure that everyone has a great time."

Mark Kelbel, head golf pro at The Broadmoor Golf Club, Colorado Springs, Colorado, says companies should book a stay or trip with a venue used to taking care of group business and dealing with their needs, wants and concerns that go well beyond golf.

"We have to show that we value the fact they have chosen The Broadmoor for their outing. If we don't, someone down the street will be more than happy to," he says. "We pay attention to details and go the extra mile to make sure the stay is enjoyable and meets their satisfaction."

Kelbel's best advice for meeting planners who are scheduling a golf event at his club is to plan everything out, covering all scenarios, and understand the group dynamic.

"You want to set up the format so that everyone has a great time, and you don't ever want someone to be in an uncomfortable position based on their particular game," he says. "Plan enough activities to provide a great value experience, but don't try to cram too much in."

The Planners Speak

For the past five years, FirstBank Florida in Miami has held an annual charity golf tournament at Trump National

John Oxford (left) with shirt-sponsored PGA pro Dominic Bozzelli, who plays with participants in Renasant Golf Marketing Events.

Doral Miami, with proceeds benefiting ASPIRA of Florida, charter schools in underserved Miami-area communities.

"Working with those at Trump Doral has been a great experience. The tournament is very well planned each year, and their golf team is wonderful," says Hernando J. Novoa, vice president of FirstBank Florida's consumer banking group. "Every year has gotten bigger and better as we add more things, such as events at

different holes. Plus, the golf course offers a competitive edge that others don't, and our players enjoy that."

Novoa says he appreciates that Doral's director of golf serves as a one-touch contact and helps with all communication, logistics and support from the contract stage through the tournament.

"Right before, we have our vendors going to different holes and logistically, the golf team helps get them out there

"This makes for a cool golf inclusion when you can work your sponsored pros in to play rotating holes with your teams."

John Oxford, Director of Corporate Marketing
Renasant Corporation, Tupelo, MS



Credit: John Oliver/Cameragraphics

with their tents and helps set everything up," he says. "There are people constantly running around in carts, and it's vital we give them the support they need, and we've always gotten that."

John Oxford, director of corporate marketing for Renasant Corporation, a financial services company with banking locations in Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Florida, helps to plan the company's golf events throughout the year, and says the key to success is being able to serve a diversity of skill levels while allowing all players to have fun.

"On corporate outings, many participants are nervous about making impressions with their associates, and golf can increase those butterflies, especially for the less talented that need to be there for networking," he says. "Making people hurry up, overzealous rangers and lack

"You want to set up the format so that everyone has a great time, and you don't ever want someone to be in an uncomfortable position based on their particular game."

Mark Kelbel, Head Golf Pro
The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, CO

for the young agents but it's open to any of our convention attendees."

The 2017 tournament had 140 players, and the FAIA raised approximately \$60,000 in sponsorships.

"People anticipate the tournament and sign up months in advance, Champany says. "They want to see their buddies and work on the relationships they have established. What I've learned through the years is that the key to running a smooth event is communication — and that includes how we send out notifications about the event, working with those we partner with on where the proceeds are going, and staying in touch with those at the golf venue."

Teeing Off

The first step in planning the FAIA event each year, Champany says, is to make contact with the resorts she's considering and discussing the details on an initial call to find which one is best for the organization's needs. Price is discussed, as well as how

of cart services can really bring down a great corporate outing. It's important to work with a golf resort that will work with you in planning the perfect day."

Melissa Georgieff Champany, director of membership outreach and member engagement specialist for the Florida Association of Insurance Agents (FAIA), Tallahassee, Florida, heads up the organization's annual Young Agent's Council Golf Tournament. In 2018, the event is planned for Rosen Shingle Creek in Orlando.

"We have a larger event that goes on — our FAIA Annual Convention — affiliated with the golf event, and nearly 2,000 attendees come through our exhibit hall with approximately 312 exhibitors," she says. "The golf tournament is primarily

for someone who is willing to work with me. I've found they appreciate it if you know what you want."

Ryan Hosford, director of golf at Rosen Shingle Creek, Orlando, Florida, says contract negotiations can take some time, but it's important to ensure that the client is getting what they want out of the program.

That includes knowing their expectations and the goal for the event — fundraising, networking, thanking clients for business, etc. Regardless, the golf resort team is constituted to meet and exceed all expectations.

"If you're talking about a golf tournament, it's important to know who will be participating. You don't want to have some person who has never played golf before thrown into a position where they are going to be embarrassed," he says. "The meeting planner should know who are really golfers, and those who may need to be advised by our golf academy first, as that might be a less intimidating situation to be in."

Creating the perfect event for a corporation is all about listening and communicating effectively, Allan says.

"Before you can make any suggestions or begin to set anything up, you need to understand who the group is, what they are looking for, and how much time they have," he says. "We try to involve leaders and coordinators from all appropriate departments with groups so that everyone stays in the loop throughout the process in order to provide the very best program experience. Our group golf professional will be in constant contact throughout the event to ensure that it goes smoothly from start to finish."

Things that should be discussed very early on, Ruiz says, are the caliber of golfer (low or high handicaps), the goal of event, day, time, course and pricing per player, food and beverage options,

format of any contests and prizes, arrival, pre-golf activities and post-golf events.

Tips for Success

Oxford's three best pieces of advice for meeting planners on how they can help create the perfect golf program experience are to be friendly, help create games such as closest to the pin, and have an app for the day's events that helps with as many things as possible.

He also advises planners to reserve some extra carts so that those running the event can attend to any problems that golfers may have along the course.

Kelbel notes that planners should familiarize themselves with the course and facilities ahead of time, as he's seen planners panic because they don't understand the logistics of it all.

In a tournament setting, he suggests putting golfers with similar abilities together, and coming up with other things for non-golfers to do and succeed at.

For those who take part in a symposium or golf academy, Hosford says they, too, can learn some important lessons that can help their future business needs.

"If a company wants to focus on golf as a way to teambuild or sell or network, a lot of time people are going to feel intimidated," he says. "We can advise people who might not play much golf about how to get around the course, what to say, how to book a tee time so they feel more comfortable."

Some meeting planners (especially those fundraising) are interested in doing a helicopter drop, where a helicopter drops hundreds of bouncing golf balls onto a putting green, and prizes are given to those that land closest and farthest from the hole. The reality is most courses don't do this, and even those that do need time to get it all worked out, so planners need to communicate that interest early.

"Some courses might not have a company that can help with that. There are liability issues, airspace issues, and planners shouldn't assume every one

can come through," Hosford says. "We've done them often at Rosen Shingle Creek and can guide them along and make it a success."

Everyone Makes Mistakes

One thing that Champany learned early on in planning the FAIA event is that

you need to be prepared for weather and have a backup plan in case of heavy rains.

"In the early days, I just assumed we could make things work, but you need to have a designated rain plan and work things out with the resort ahead of time — it has to be part of the contract," she says. "What will they charge? What are they willing to do to help? Can golfers stay in the clubhouse and do something inside, like cornhole? These are all things that need to be planned in advance."

Another mistake that many meeting planners make is overbooking the number of people golfing

"People anticipate the tournament and sign up months in advance. They want to see their buddies and work on the relationships they have established."

Melissa Georgieff Champany, Director of Membership Outreach and Member Engagement Specialist, Florida Association of Insurance Agents, Tallahassee, FL

and going over the magic number of 140, which can slow down the day and upset participants. Champany recommends always underbooking by a four-some in case someone comes in and is willing to "double the rate" to play, which often happens.

Problems that Novoa has seen over his five years of planning include deliveries not happening on time, inclement weather and things not being set up on time. The fix to all of these problems is planning ahead.

"You need to have a team at the ready for 'disaster recovery,'" he says. "We start preparing the evening before, around 6 p.m., so if something is missing or broken, we have all that night and the next morning to react and fix

the problem. The golf team support is welcomed at these times."

Mistakes often happen because the planners don't put their faith in the resort. Allan says some group planners tend to micromanage their programs, which can create stress and handicap the facility from really "doing their thing."

"Group planners are under a lot of pressure to provide a top-notch program experience, so you can understand their desire to manage every little aspect of an event," he says. "However, they brought the event to you because they were impressed during the site visit, so it will turn out best if they trust us to provide the experience we promised we

could and would."

And never wait until the last minute to book the program, says Ruiz, as it's very easy to miss the opportunity to book the exact day, course and time you want.

"Also, keep in mind that it's more than just the four-hour round that makes up the guests' golf experience," she says. "Did they have the opportunity to warm up? Were the players welcomed? Was the event clearly set up with cart signs specifically for them? Was food and beverage provided and available on course? Was the format of the event fun and clearly communicated? Was pace-of-play on the course satisfactory?"

The answer to all of these questions better be "yes" if a golf resort expects to

Melissa Georgieff Champany with Florida Association of Insurance Agents tournament participants.



Credit: Miriam Ericson, Orlando

Credit: The Broadmoor

The venerable Broadmoor Golf Club and East Course.





Credit: Trump National Doral Miami

Blue Monster hole 5 at Trump National Doral Miami.

be successful with group outings and corporate tournaments.

Business Benefits

Four hours on a golf course is a great way to get clients somewhat alone and without digital distraction. Planners say this could be one of the biggest advantages of the day.

"Since the golf event requires that you spend almost an entire day with a client, there couldn't be a better way to engage

ber about golf and business is that it has the opportunity to build relationships," she says. "A golf round usually takes four hours to play, which is valuable time to build a relationship with a potential client, partner or staff member."

Par for the Course

Trump National Doral features four championship golf courses, a state-of-the-art practice facility with LED lighting for nighttime play, a leading golf academy and the nation's largest golf shop, all self-contained in an exclusive, 800-acre tropical oasis just minutes from Miami's international airport and world-famous beaches.

Sea Island Resort offers world-class facilities in all areas including golf, with

Monday morning in a meeting and then do a shotgun tournament on Monday afternoon and come out here to play," Kelbel says. "The physical property is incredible; we're in a gorgeous, majestic setting right up against the Rocky Mountains."

The Streamsong Resort in Central Florida is home to three nationally ranked courses, Streamsong Red, Streamsong Blue, and the brand-new Streamsong Black, designed by Olympic golf course designer Gil Hanse. The resort is a favorite among meeting planners both in and out of town, and its staff has an event team at the ready to help plan the perfect corporate golf outing.

Rosen Shingle Creek, designed by the Arnold Palmer Design Company, is famous for its extra-long par 4s and par 5s surrounded by enchanting flora and wildlife, as well as its challenging hazards, twists and bends.

"Businesses can impress clients with a round on this award-winning course," Hosford says. "Avid golfers will really appreciate playing the course and will remember it for a long time."

The 19th Hole

Remember, even if the meeting planner is not a golfer, by working in cooperation with a resort's golf team, they can execute a flawless golf event.

A golf course is a unique place for teambuilding, particularly when hosting something like a scramble, where there is not a lot of pressure on anyone to do well and everyone supports one another.

and grow closer, improving the business relationship," Novoa says. "The key to an event like this is to focus on networking opportunities for clients. It provides a platform for us and our clients to get to know each other better and provides an opportunity to expand our services and relationships with customers."

Renasant Corporation is the shirt sponsor of PGA Tour and LPGA Tour players Dominic Bozzelli and Ally McDonald, respectively. "This makes for a cool golf inclusion when you can work your sponsored pros in to play rotating holes with your teams," Oxford says. "It's something that can improve the business relationship even more."

Ruiz says that it can be a great team-building event, especially during a "scramble" format, where everyone in the foursome has an opportunity to contribute to the team, but a player won't feel so pressured if they hit a bad shot.

"The most important thing to remem-

beautiful courses, a renowned Golf Performance Center, and, Allan says, "the service to back it all up."

"We pride ourselves on providing unique programs individually catered to each group so that year after year our clients are surprised, wowed and excited by what they experience," he says.

"It provides a platform for us and our clients to get to know each other better and provides an opportunity to expand our services and relationships with customers."

Hernando J. Novoa, Vice President, Consumer Banking Group
FirstBank Florida, Miami, FL

Approximately 70 percent of business at The Broadmoor is comprised of groups, and most of the time meetings are involved. But companies almost always take advantage of the five-star, five-diamond golf course as part of the group activities.

"They may spend Sunday night and

"The beauty of tournaments when on a business trip is people's ability to get together and talk away from normal business offices," Kelbel says. "Everyone is rooting for one another, and no one is in a three-piece suit sitting across from one another at a desk, so it's a much less stressful environment."

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The Las Vegas Strip will accommodate even more meetings when Caesars Forum, a 550,000-sf conference center, opens in 2020.

Catering to nearly 22,000 meetings annually that draw anywhere from a few dozen attendees to the more than 165,000 who attend the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) each January, it probably comes as no surprise that Las Vegas was recently named World's Leading Meetings & Conference Destination for 2017 by the World Travel Awards — for the fifth year in a row.

Home to three of the country's 10 largest convention venues and almost 150,000 hotel rooms, the city is built to host. In 2016, Las Vegas welcomed more than 6.3 million meeting and convention attendees. And 2017 is on track to be even bigger, with convention visitor numbers up 5.1 percent for the first 10 months of the year.

Giving Caesars Credit

But Las Vegas is also designed to entertain, and it's a winner for delegates, according to Jill Leimbach, director of meetings for the National Association of Credit Management (NACM).

"Las Vegas is typically a popular location for our delegates," says Leimbach. "Our overall attendance numbers tend

Nevada Meetings From The Strip to The Lake

By David Swanson

to be a little higher when Las Vegas is the host city. It's also a more expensive location for our association, compared to other destinations. So, for us, we need the extra boost in attendance numbers to be able to afford the higher F&B and AV price tags."

Headquartered in Columbia, Maryland, NACM supports more than 14,000 business credit and financial professionals worldwide. The organization's annual Credit Congress & Exposition is the largest gathering of credit professionals. For its 120th conference, the group chose Caesars Palace Las Vegas, the hotel that ranked No.14 on Cvent's 2017 list of the 100 top meeting hotels in the U.S. NACM's June 2016 conference drew 1,600 attendees.

"We chose Caesars Palace because it

was a 'new' property for our group," explains Leimbach. "We met at the Rio Hotel in 2010 and 2013, and our delegates were asking to be back on The Strip. We have a good working relationship with the Caesars family of properties, so we began exploring the possibility of Caesars Palace, and the hotel had ample meeting space to accommodate both our meeting and expo.

"We have been fortunate to work with the same group reservations (housing) coordinator multiple times. Even though we've met in different Caesars properties, we were able to request the same contact. It was a win-win for both the hotel and my team, as she is familiar with our group, and we are comfortable with her."

That team familiarity was impor-

tant to Leimbach, who notes that almost any venue can present unexpected challenges.

"Even if you have been to a property before and you think you know everything that could be problematic, there is always something unanticipated. Hotels change their rules and policies all the time — it's important to read and/or re-read the convention services guidelines before you start the contracting process. That way you can discuss and negotiate up front. It's tough when you 'don't know what you don't know,' and then it's too late to work with the hotel on a particular issue."

All of the NACM meetings and expo could be contained at the Caesars property. The resort offers 300,000 sf of meeting space, including four ballrooms ranging up to the 51,000-sf, pillarless Octavius and Forum Ballrooms, each of which can accommodate as many as 5,555 guests and can be reconfigured into up to 25 separate breakout rooms.

Caesars Palace completed a \$100

million renovation of its Palace Tower in fall 2017, the resort's largest building featuring 1,181 guest rooms and suites. The tower's 29th floor offers 10 villas ranging up to 4,085 sf, each appointed with more than \$1 million in furniture and décor.

"Reach out to (LVCVA) even if you have held events in Las Vegas before and you do not feel you need assistance from a CVB. They can be a great resource."

Jill Leimbach, Director of Meetings
National Association of
Credit Management
Columbia, MD



recent in a series of new or renovated rooms at Caesars Palace within the past six years, leaving 90 percent of the resort's room product new or remodeled. This includes redesigns of the Octavius,

Julius and Augustus towers, and a total investment of nearly \$1 billion.

Leimbach flagged a few issues for planners to be aware of, both at Caesars Palace and in Las Vegas in general.

"Because Caesars Palace is such a large property, it's important to request sleeping rooms in the towers closest to the meeting space. This is especially important for your staff members," she added.

"And note that the hotel charges an early check-in fee for guests checking in before the standard time, 4 p.m. — even if the sleeping room is clean, ready and available. This can create a huge bottleneck at the hotel registration desk at 4 p.m. on your peak check-in day. Talk with the hotel about flexibility for check-in days."

Not surprisingly, resort fees remain a thorny issue.

"It's one of the biggest challenges with all Las Vegas properties," says Leimbach. "Resort fees are an added cost that can tip the affordability scale for our members. Being a financial organization, travel costs are extremely important to our group, and some-



Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort has been the site of InterWest Insurance Services' Spring Sales Exchange for the past 15 years.



Caesars Palace completed a \$100 million renovation of its Palace Tower in fall 2017.

times the added resort fee can be the deal breaker.”

Like others, Leimbach recommends working with the team at the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA) early on.

“Reach out to them, even if you have held events in Las Vegas before and you do not feel you need assistance from a CVB. They can be a great resource.”

‘Amazing’ MGM Grand

Renee Black, principal and senior event producer, planit inc., says Las Vegas is a draw for her clients as well. For the national conference and expo for TD Ameritrade Investools in August 2017, Black worked with MGM Resorts, placing the 1,200-attendee group at the MGM Grand and adjacent Signature at MGM Grand.

“Las Vegas is a very popular destination for this particular group of clients, based on surveys that have been conducted over multiple years,” suggests Black. “Lift and proximity of airport to the conference hotel is perfect for the attendee who is looking to maximize their time and ease of getting to and from airport to hotel room. And MGM is a draw in itself with all of its options at every price point.”

In addition to accommodations at the bustling 4,996-room MGM Grand, The Signature at MGM Grand next door is a great overflow option. Situated in three standalone towers, the hotel offers 1,728 all-suite rooms and a non-smoking, casino-free environment. While The Signature has just 5,000 sf of meeting space, the property is connected to MGM Grand by private walk-

way, where 600,000 sf of convention space is available.

“Some of our attendees mention how far the MGM convention center space is from the hotel room in walking distance,” says Black, who notes that about 75 percent of her delegates were over 45 years of age, and some of the older attendees require motorized scooters. “But we don’t see this challenge as a fierce one since most people are now looking to get their steps in with their Fitbit. Make it an attendee contest and bring a wellness initiative into play.



Renee Black

Principal and Senior Event Producer
planit inc.
Omaha, NE

“The convention center we used is MGM’s, and it’s attached to the hotel. The massive square footage on the first floor with wide open prefunction space offers multiple options for meeting space needs, food and beverage displays, and an attractive registration area with enough room for foot traffic



The National Association of Credit Management’s annual Credit Congress & Exposition was held at Caesars Palace.

“We have been at the MGM multiple times over the years as meeting planners, and the space is very accommodating — one of the best layouts of any domestic property.”

and little congestion. We have been at the MGM multiple times over the years as meeting planners, and the space is very accommodating — one of the best layouts of any domestic property. The service and the food have always been excellent, and how they utilize their banquet capabilities to create custom menus is a strong point, too.”

Black calls the MGM team “amazing,” and says she could count on all conference objectives and goals to be understood by the MGM team.

“I always felt like we were being listened to, and not told how things were going to go,” adds Black. “I share with all of our clients how impressed I am with MGM, and we love going there every opportunity we can. In particular, Zack Lucevic and Lynda Posgay are hands down the best in the business. I cannot say enough how Lynda is a true professional in every aspect and is pure magic on a program. We can’t thank her enough for her dedication to the client.”

One unique challenge that Black and MGM finessed was coordinating with another major event.

“The day of setup for us was also the day of the Mayweather-McGregor fight,” explains Black. “All kinds of interesting elements came into play, but MGM helped us maneuver through some security, logistics and hotel lodging matters with ease.”

A Long List of Options

MGM Resorts’ Las Vegas footprint is substantial, encompassing 13 different properties on The Strip, at all price points. Among the company’s projects, Luxor Hotel and Casino recently unveiled the first of its newly remodeled accommodations as the hotel continues the redesign of more than 1,700 hotel rooms in its East and West towers, expected to wrap up this spring. The



The new Park MGM will feature a 77,000-sf conference facility when it opens in 2018.

rooms are inspired by the iconic Luxor’s unique geometric form and feature a crisp, natural color palette and modern, efficient design.

Meanwhile, MGM Resorts is nearing completion on a \$450 million project to transform the 21-year-old Monte Carlo Resort and Casino into Park MGM, replete with a brand new 77,000-sf conference facility. Offering both non-traditional spaces and flexible design, Park MGM is designed to fill an unmet need in Las Vegas for small groups, while also offering beautiful spaces for groups up to 5,000 attendees.

The hotel itself will be a two-fer: 2,700 rooms and suites will be part of the Park MGM brand, while 300 rooms will be dedicated to the a boutique concept, NoMad (short for North of Madison). The construction, renovation and rebranding of Park MGM is expected to be completed by mid-2018, with a slew of new restaurants and bars opening as the construction enters its final phases.

Caesars recently announced plans to develop a 550,000-sf conference center in Las Vegas, named Caesars Forum, featuring the two largest pillarless ballrooms in North America. When completed in 2020, it will feature 300,000 sf of flexible meeting space, equivalent to more than five football fields, and will be located east of the Las Vegas Strip with bridge connections to Harrah’s, Linq and the Linq Promenade.

The JW Marriott Las Vegas Resort & Spa is investing millions of dollars in renovations, and last summer revealed two unique spaces. The Palms Executive Conference Center offers more than 15,000 sf of customizable

indoor/outdoor and prefunction space with natural light, including the Parian Room, which can accommodate 50–200 guests, and nine breakout rooms to house 10–100 guests. Just off the casino floor, Cascade provides more than 10,000 sf of indoor/outdoor space with an open floorplan and modern design.

The Strip’s most storied property, the Flamingo Las Vegas, has completed a \$6.5 million meeting space renovation, which began in April 2017. A \$90 million renovation of 1,270 guest rooms began in August, with completion scheduled for the second quarter of 2018. Caesars describes the new look as “unique, contemporary and retro-chic designs with accents that celebrate Flamingo’s rich history.” The 70-year-old hotel offers a total of more than 3,500 guest rooms and a 73,000-sf Corporate Convention Center and Executive Conference Center.

Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino just completed a \$100 million renovation of its 2,496 rooms. Pairing dynamic entertainment and dining offerings, the renovation comes as the resort celebrates 10 years at the center of the Las Vegas Strip, and represents the first in Caesars Entertainment’s Las Vegas portfolio to have all guest rooms completely renovated as part of a 23,000-room renovation program that will be more than 50 percent complete at the end of 2017.

Earlier this year, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Las Vegas added almost 18,000 sf of meeting and convention space, bringing the venue to nearly 110,000 sf total. The fully functional Business Center has been relocated,

and the Artist Ballroom has been expanded to 28,000 sf with ceiling heights up to 22 feet, allowing for eight separate configurations. The resort has maximized its flexibility for meeting planners to customize events — from large, premium trade shows and corporate gatherings to intimate executive meetings and incentive experiences.

And W Hotels Worldwide has launched its first flag in Sin City, taking one tower of the four-year-old SLS Las Vegas to create a hotel-within-a-hotel, the W Las Vegas. The brand’s signature Living Room greets visitors with a nod to both the desert setting and the location’s historic original incarnation as the Sahara Hotel and Casino, while the 289 guest rooms received a refresh by Philippe Starck in collaboration with designer Gensler. A new, 15,000-sf state-of-the-art meeting and event space opened at the W Las Vegas, supplementing 80,000 sf of flexible meeting space available at the adjacent SLS Las Vegas.

M Resort Spa Casino offers attendees a unique perspective with fabulous views from its elevated location over-



Flamingo Las Vegas will debut a guest room makeover in 2018.

looking The Strip. The resort features more than 92,000 sf of open and dynamic meeting space along with multiple reception areas throughout the 90-acre property. Venues include the 25,000-sf M Pavilion; 17,400-sf Milan ballroom; and a boardroom and convenient business center. Additional venues include Lux, set high atop the re-



M Resort Spa Casino's "Lux" venue offers 7,200 sf of special event space for groups.

Credit: M Resort Spa Casino

getting both business and leisure guests.

Location is a continuing draw for InterWest Insurance Services, which has held their Spring Sales Exchange for more than 15 years at the 422-room Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa and Casino — most recently last June.

"We wanted a destination location without having our employees travel too far," explains Jennifer Garcia, InterWest's executive administrative assistant. "Lake Tahoe is easy for everyone to get to — Incline Village is close enough to the Reno Airport for our guest speakers to fly in for our event. And the Hyatt is simply the most beautiful hotel around Lake Tahoe. When you hold an all-day event, nothing is better than taking breaks and walking along the beach or having a barbecue cookout dinner on the lake."

InterWest held almost all events at the resort's Lakeside Ballroom, which sits right on the lake and encompasses 65,000 sf of meeting space, almost a third of which is indoors.

"If you can do it, I highly recommend using this space," says Garcia. "We especially like using it for

"It's great when people you work with, year after year, become more like friends. They really understand your business and what you're trying to accomplish."



Jennifer Garcia

Executive Administrative Assistant
InterWest Insurance Services
Sacramento, CA

our reception and dinner. However, the Lakeside Ballroom is not connected to the hotel and it's a little walk across the street. While this can be a bit of an inconvenience, the hotel does offer a shuttle that will pick up down by the ballroom

and drive guests back to the main hotel. There are also several cabins you can reserve near the ballroom."

Garcia says the Hyatt Regency's chef is one of her favorites to work with and the kitchen is accommodating with special food requests.

"He is great at understanding any special needs we have and is willing to come up with one or two new items for us, especially as we have used the same menu year after year. We use the onsite Lone Eagle Grille for one of our dinners. The food is delicious, the service is outstanding, and the facilities are always well maintained and clean. Whether having a cocktail on the patio or dinner watching the sunset over Lake Tahoe, you can't beat the view.

"We use other venues for offsite excursions including golf at some of the local courses, such as Grey's Crossing, Coyote Moon and the Championship Golf Course, as well as mountain biking, hiking and kayaking adventures through Tahoe Adventures. And there is always the world-class spa at the Hyatt," Garcia adds.

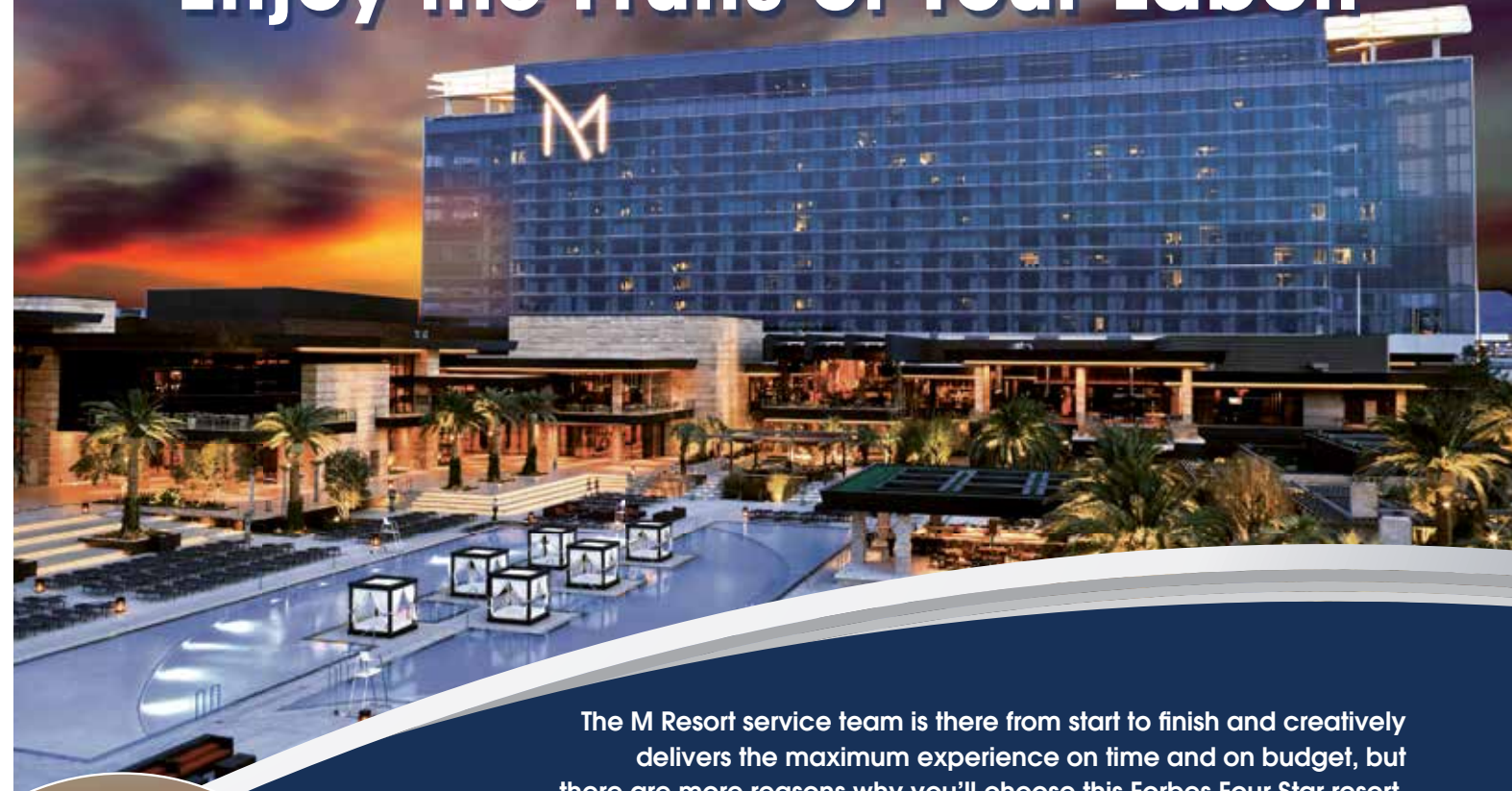
"But if you're doing your meeting during spring or summer months, take advantage of what the Hyatt has to offer right on their property — there may be no need to send your guests offsite. But pay attention to the weather reports. The weather can be very unpredictable at times which can quickly turn an outside event indoors. I've had to rely on the advice of the staff about moving an event indoors, because the weather changes over the course of a day."

Garcia offers strong commendation for the Hyatt Regency's meetings team, including Debbie Christie, director of group sales; Kaylen O'Donnell, event planning manager; Sarahbeth Glenn, marketing and events coordinator; and Lindsay Scholl, sales manager.

"It's great when people you work with year after year become more like friends. They really understand your business and what you're trying to accomplish. Their attention to detail and service all contribute to the overall outcome of our event, and we couldn't do it without them."

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Orlando

Why Groups Return Year After Year

By John Buchanan

It's no accident that Orlando has become the top destination in the U.S. for corporate meetings. That title has emerged from a decade-long campaign to build its hotel inventory, improve its dining scene, and promote its world-famous theme parks and roster of other unique activities. And all of that effort had paid off with an unusually high repeat business factor.

"Orlando has developed its reputation as a great meeting destination for a number of reasons," says Fred Shea, senior vice president, sales and services, convention sales, at Visit Orlando. "We have tremendous hotel inventory, and we offer an amazing range of attractions and activities, led by our world-famous theme parks, which everybody knows and loves. And we also offer great value. So when you combine

A block party at Universal's CityWalk.

Credit: Universal Orlando

all those things, which are the key things planners are looking for, you realize that Orlando is one of the top meeting destinations in the country."

The city also claims an exceptionally high level of repeat business — planners who bring groups back year after year and companies that host multiple

Mark Events, "we have received recommendations (to think about) changing the destination. But this year in particular, we didn't get many of those. Our attendees are very happy with Orlando, so we keep going back every year."

One big reason for the extraordinary loyalty from Rybka's perspective as a

"We have insurance and financial services clients who come here with a major third-party meeting, then they come back for a smaller in-house employee meeting, then they come back with an incentive program."

Fred Shea, Senior Vice President
Sales and Services, Convention Sales, Visit Orlando



meetings and events in Orlando during the same calendar year.

"One of the things planners tell us about why they come back over and over again is that they come here with different groups," Shea says. "For example, we have insurance and financial services clients who come here with a major third-party meeting, then they come back for a smaller in-house employee meeting, then they come back with an incentive program. And they do that year after year because for all of their meetings, they find that their attendees love coming to Orlando because of the experience and the fun they have."

A Two-Decade History of Orlando Meetings

Among the insurance and financial services companies that have used Orlando for a major meeting every year for a very long time is Akron, Ohio-based ValMark Financial Group. The company has hosted one of its two most important annual meetings here every year for two decades. Last October, its Member Summit, attended by third-party financial-insurance advisors who represent ValMark, as well as key vendors, drew 407 attendees to the Waldorf Astoria Orlando and adjacent sister property, the Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek.

"Over the years," says Cheryl Rybka, registered principal and director of Val-

planner: "An important advantage of using Orlando is that event resources are available at reasonable prices. We tend to do business directly with vendors, and not through middlemen, when we're planning entertainment and activities. And in that sense, Orlando is a dream."

Another factor in ValMark's loyalty is the high quality of hotel food and beverage product in Orlando. A highlight of last October's meeting, Rybka says, was a formal sit-down dinner hosted in a ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria. She also rates the F&B at the Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek as excellent. "We used every restaurant they have. And they were all excellent."

In order to ensure consistently excellent delivery of services from two hotels she had not previously used, she retained a local food and beverage expert to assist in meal planning and management. "I had done it before for other meetings," she says, "but I had never done it with anyone of the caliber of the person I hired in Orlando. And it really paid off, because F&B is always one of the challenges you face in planning a major meeting."

Exceptional Airlift

A trio of additional key factors in Orlando's formidable reputation as a meeting destination are its unparalleled airlift, both domestically and internationally, its value-based fares and its top-quality airport. Those benefits accrue to groups, Shea says, because Orlando is perennially ranked as the No. 1 family vacation destination in the world. Orlando International Airport is also very modern and easy to access, and it is now adding a new \$1.8 billion terminal that will make its debut in 2019.

Rybka agrees that airlift, low fares and an exceptional airport are factors in ValMark's loyalty. "The airlift and pricing of flights into Orlando are important to us and our attendees," she says. "It's hard for comparable destinations to compete with the airfares we get with Orlando. And the airlift itself, and the quality of the airport, are also very important factors in why we keep going back every



The Grand Ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria Orlando.

Credit: Waldorf Astoria Orlando



The new Loews Sapphire Falls at Universal Orlando Resort.

Credit: Universal Orlando

year. The airport is very clean and very conveniently laid out."

Meeting Hotels Abound

Of particular importance to the insurance and financial planners who use Orlando is the city's hotel inventory. "We currently have," Shea says, "a total

constantly being expanded and renovated, Shea says.

The most recent debut of a new hotel was the Loews Sapphire Falls, which opened last year at Universal Orlando Resort. Loews Cabana Bay at Universal also has been expanded to 1,200 rooms. A new 600-room Aventura hotel will open at Universal next summer at Universal. Disney currently is expanding its Coronado Springs property by 500 rooms, which will come online in 2020. The Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort recently completed a \$140 million renovation of all guests rooms and meeting space. A new 500-room JW Marriott being developed in Bonnet Creek will open in 2020. Doubletree Hotel by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld is in the process of adding more meeting space, including a 20,000 sf ballroom.

Upscale Dining Scene

Another major factor in Orlando's popularity as a meeting destination is

ment of Orlando's dining scene. Last fall, she planned a dine-around night that featured the use of private dining rooms or areas in 13 local restaurants. Among the favorites among attendees were Chatham's, which features classical fine dining with a French twist, and Christini's Ristorante Italiano, located in the Marketplace at Dr. Phillips and featuring fine Italian cuisine.

Rybka says she was particularly impressed that more than 400 attendees could be dispatched to 13 restaurants and enjoy a universally superb experience. "In our post-meeting attendee survey," she says, "all of the restaurants got excellent reviews."

That report comes as no surprise to Visit Orlando's Shea. "What's been happening over the last decade, and has really accelerated in the last five years," he says, "is that there has been an explosion of more upscale dining in Orlando. And that has been in direct response to what meeting planners were telling us, which was that they needed more high-end dining options for their groups. And that was particularly true among insurance and financial groups. And we have responded to that. In addition to the area known as 'Restaurant Row,' we now also have excellent dining options up and down International Drive. And in terms of meetings, the great thing about most of our restaurants, especially those in the convention center district, is that they are available for buyout."

"Over the years we have received recommendations (to think about) changing the destination. But this year in particular, we didn't get many of those. Our attendees are very happy with Orlando, so we keep going back every year."

Cheryl Rybka, Registered Principal and Director
ValMark Events, ValMark Financial Group, Akron, OH



of 120,000 hotel rooms and about 150 meeting-quality hotels, including 38 properties that are defined as convention hotels, which means at least 300 rooms and 20,000 sf of meeting space. And together, they offer the best quality and range of pricing a planner will find anywhere."

Rybka agrees that the city's hotel product is exceptional. "The 2017 meeting was our first use of the Waldorf Astoria and Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek. And both properties offer extraordinary quality. We used both hotels in order to give our attendees the option of two different price points. But both of them are exceptional in terms of quality."

And the city's hotel inventory is



The Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort recently completed a \$140 million renovation of all guests rooms and meeting space.

Credit: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort

Claudia Vila, managing director of the Central Florida office of statewide destination management company Florida Meeting Services, adds that another key factor in the growth of Orlando's dining scene has been its ever-expanding population of celebrity chef restaurants. Among the first celebrity chefs to help establish Orlando as a fine-dining destination, she notes, were Emeril Lagasse, Wolfgang Puck and Todd English. Now, many more have joined them.

Among the new restaurants Vila cites as among the city's best are Homecoming, from chef Art Smith, and Norman's, from legendary Florida chef Norman Van Aken, at The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes. She also cites a new STK steak house, which opened in 2016.

Another new option Shea high-



Mango's Tropical Cafe, a Latin-themed restaurant/entertainment venue popular with corporate groups, is near the Orange County Convention Center.

Credit: Mango's Tropical Cafe

that each is capable of hosting a dine-around "under one roof" for groups of up to several thousand attendees.

"Disney Springs, formerly known as Downtown Disney," Shea says, "has

Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar in Pointe Orlando can accommodate up to 1,000 people for private events.



Credit: Cuba Libre

lights is the Orlando outpost of South Beach Miami landmark Mango's Tropical Cafe, a Latin-themed restaurant/entertainment venue that opened in 2016 near the Orange County Convention Center. Popular with corporate groups, Mango's accommodates up to 2,000 for special events.

A dining-related fact that makes Orlando unique is that it features a trio of major offsite dining and entertainment complexes — Disney Springs, CityWalk at Universal and Pointe Orlando on International Drive near the Orange County Convention Center —

been doubled in size and now offers a wide range of fine dining options, with more still opening." Among the most popular restaurants for upscale groups is Morimoto Asia, from TV's "Iron Chef" Masaharu Morimoto.

Universal Orlando's CityWalk offers a vast range of options, including a Hard Rock Cafe, at a range of price points. Vila soon will use a buyout of it for a group of 2,200 attendees.

Pointe Orlando also features a vast range of options, including Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House, B.B. King's Blues Club, and Cuba Libre Restaurant

& Rum Bar, which accommodates up to 1,000 for private events.

Attracted to Theme Parks

Perhaps the most interesting development in Orlando's rise as a meeting destination has been the rise of its theme parks as a draw for attendees. "When I first started here at Visit Orlando, I represented the third-party market," Shea says. "And I talked to a lot of third-party customers who would say, 'Tell me about new attractions in Orlando. I don't want to hear about the theme parks. My people don't want to go to the theme parks. They want something new and different.' And we'd always show them new stuff. But then what we found, as the date of the meeting got closer and closer, was that people do want to go to the theme parks. That's because everybody knows about them, and so they're curious. And then once they go, they love them. So that has made the theme parks our top attraction for meeting groups."

The other thing that has played a role in the popularity of the parks is their unique ability to deliver turnkey access to Hollywood-quality production services that consistently deliver spectacular events. "The planner doesn't have to do anything but tell the park what he or she wants," Shea says. "And not only does it get handled for you, but you get a level of production that means you get a truly memorable offsite event."

Vila goes even further. As a DMC ex-

ecutive who provides support to many corporate meetings and incentive programs every year, she says that the use of a theme park as a venue is now almost considered mandatory.

“Our theme parks are the thing that really comes to mind when people think of Orlando,” she says. “So today, most meeting planners realize that if they’re going to do a meeting or incentive program here, they have to include one of the three parks — Disney, SeaWorld or Universal — in their agenda, because attendees will expect it.”

What many first-time users of Orlando find surprising, she says, is the vast roster of options available for groups of all sizes, even small ones. “You can do everything from a buyout of and ma-



Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse's eponymous Orlando restaurant is in Universal Orlando's CityWalk.

Credit: Universal Orlando

And those people always want to experience the parks. It's one of the reasons they get so excited about coming here for a meeting.”

All companies want their meetings to

“Today, most meeting planners realize that if they’re going to do a meeting or incentive program here, they have to include one of the three parks...in their agenda, because attendees will expect it.”

Claudia Vila, Managing Director
Florida Meeting Services, Central Florida Office



For an event at a venue like the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal to a small teambuilding event, to just buying group tickets so people can enjoy the parks in their free time. The existence of the theme parks also often means that attendees bring their families to the meeting, either for a few days before it opens or for a few days after it ends.

be as memorable as possible, Vila notes. And nothing, she says, makes a meeting more memorable than a visit to one of its trio of world-famous attractions.

Always Something New to Do

Despite the popularity of the theme parks with meeting planners and attendees, they are not the city's only activities.

“We are much more than just the theme parks,” Vila says. “New attractions are being opened all the time. And that is the other side of the Orlando story. An attendee can come here many, many times and always find something new to do. I know there are planners who believe that after you’ve been here a few times, there’s nothing new and exciting left to do. But that’s not true. The reality is that every time you come back, even if you come back every year, you’re going to find every time that there is something new and fun to do.”

For example, she says, a new attraction that is already popular with planners and their attendees is the Topgolf Orlando complex, which combines a high-tech driving range with an excellent onsite restaurant and lounge.

A time-honored favorite activity, unique to Orlando, is the world-famous Kennedy Space Center, located just 45 minutes away on the Space Coast near Cape Canaveral.

The city also offers a pair of upscale and popular bowling venues, King’s Dining & Entertainment on International Drive and Splitsville Luxury Lanes at Disney Springs.

Vila also cites another unique venue, Winter Park’s Morse Museum, which boasts the largest private collection of Tiffany glass in the U.S.

Vila and Shea agree that once planners take a serious look at Orlando, they will discover that it is one of the most unique and compelling meeting destinations in the country. And like ValMark, it’s a good bet they’ll keep coming back.

I&FMM



Topgolf Orlando, with its high-tech driving range, restaurant and lounge, offers unique event spaces for groups.

Credit: topgolf



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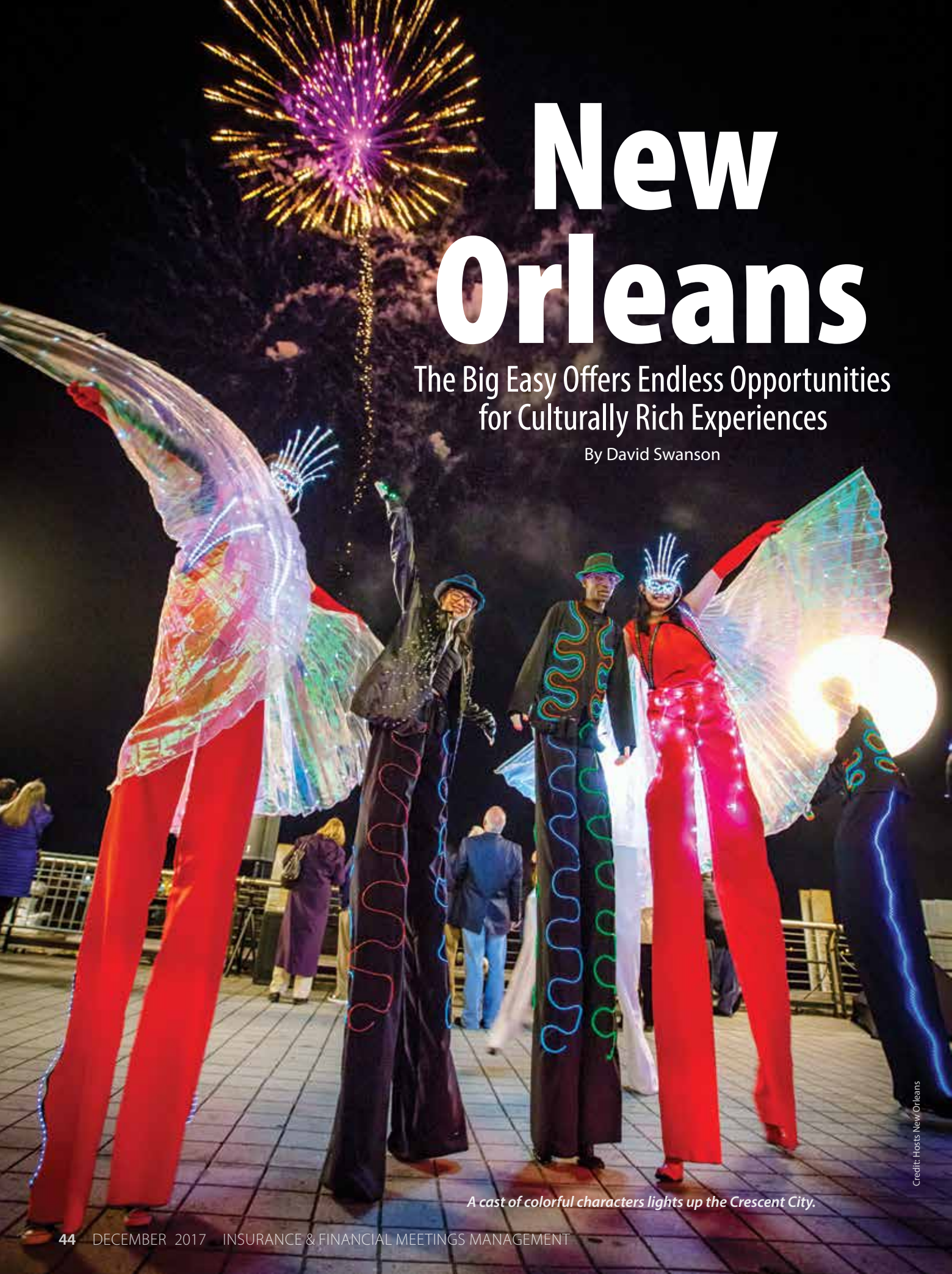
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New Orleans

The Big Easy Offers Endless Opportunities for Culturally Rich Experiences

By David Swanson



A cast of colorful characters lights up the Crescent City.

Credit: Hosts New Orleans

Historical heritage is what defines the New Orleans experience for many visitors.

Some will reflect on the architecture of the Crescent City — the French Quarter, the Garden District, the elevated European-style cemeteries — as the elements that make this city so special. Others note the city's rich musical heritage: New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz, and today the clubs and other venues remain well-stocked with a long roster of full-time musicians who eagerly share their talent with visitors.

For many, food is the focus, and Creole, Cajun and Southern soul cooking form the culinary backbone. But New Orleans' sophisticated denizens have successfully lured fine chefs from other regions to set up shop and develop a food scene that is smart and trend-defying. Others will point to the city's robust cultural heritage, where the collision of French, Spanish and African influences produce one of America's most distinct societies.

Individually or in tandem, these are among the attributes that can be woven into a successful meeting or incentive program in this great Southern city. They are among the assets that will distinguish a New Orleans gathering from the location of any previous setting meeting groups may have experienced.

"Our unique selling points come down to food, booze and jazz," explains Terry Epton CIS, CITE, DMCP, president of destination management company Hosts New Orleans. "It's the culinary, the entertainment and the nightlife." But without question, Epton adds, it's the dining scene that remains vital to

the city's appeal as a meeting destination.

"New Orleans was always a foodie destination, but what happened after Hurricane Katrina was a proliferation of new chefs and restaurants. We've always been an incubator for chefs who go on to other restaurants, and we're at the top of the food chain now."

Visitor expectations set the bar high, but even at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, exclusive food service provider Centerplate works with the city's star chefs to provide menus that reflect the standards of local restaurants.

"The food has to be good — if it isn't, they won't go to the event," explains Epton. "They aren't coming here to eat rubber chicken."

History, Culture, Food, Entertainment

Million Dollar Round Table, a global, independent association of leading life insurance and financial services professionals, has used the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center five times for its New Orleans gatherings. Jeanne Malone, CMP, director of meeting services for Million Dollar Round Table, says the convention center provides her group with a functional layout of space. Within walking distance is extensive hotel stock at various price points.

"The convention center is well laid



A balcony over Bourbon Street at the Royal Sonesta New Orleans.



"New Orleans was always a foodie destination, but what happened after Hurricane Katrina was a proliferation of new chefs and restaurants."

Terry Epton, CIS, CITE, DMCP
President
Hosts New Orleans

such facility in the nation, and 22,000 guest rooms lie within a two-mile arc along the north (east) bank of the Mississippi River. In 2013, the facility expanded its ballroom into the 60,300-sf Great Hall to complement its existing 1.1 million sf of exhibit space, the largest such space in the U.S., while a major project on the drawing board may expand the convention center footprint even further. The proposed \$1 billion public/private development would utilize 47 acres of land upriver from the current convention center for a 1,200-room hotel, transportation hub, and a mixed-use development of retail, entertainment venues, restaurants, condos and apartments.

"New Orleans has been a great des-

The main entrance at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.



Credit: Ernest N. Morial Convention Center



Credit: The Photo Group

Million Dollar Round Table annual meeting participants enjoyed entertainment and special events throughout the city.

tination for our members," explains Malone. "What draws us to return is that the city offers history, culture, incredible food, entertainment and shopping. We have held special events at various venues throughout the city for our VIP

"What draws us to return is that the city offers history, culture, incredible food, entertainment and shopping. ... There are so many venues to select from, it's always a challenge making a decision."



Jeanne Malone, CMP
Director of Meeting Services
Million Dollar Round Table
Park Ridge, IL

or specialty groups. Each experience was met with a warm welcome and outstanding meals. There are so many venues to select from, it's always a challenge making a decision."

Malone says that one of the major advantages of working with New Orleans is its CVB. "There is an incredible convention and visitors bureau. They offer great resources to assist you when planning a meeting or convention, and staff who really love their job and their city."

Million Dollar Round Table uses the Hilton New Orleans Riverside as its headquarters hotel. Located close to the convention center, the hotel is connected through a mall and offers

additional meeting space. Offering unique spaces with great views, Malone recommends getting to know the layout of the hotel ahead of an event.

"There is meeting space located in each tower. The hotel is large and laid out in a functional manner, but you need to find the shortcuts between the two towers. There are branding opportunities throughout the venue, plus wonderful restaurants and an incredible health club.

"Our sales representative and convention services manager have been outstanding. They have also been the same two people over the last couple of meetings. They understand our needs, help us to plan, are willing to accommodate our needs, and if they can't fulfill the request, they offer an alternative solution. The staff at the hotel are hospitable and always willing to help."

In 2017, the 1,622-room Hilton New Orleans Riverside continued a multiphase, multiyear renovation with a facelift for the 24,000-sf Grand Salon Ballroom and the entire second floor meeting space. The renovations included updated carpet, lighting, technology, and a complete redesign of the Churchill Ballroom that added airwalls, allowing the 20,000-sf room to divide into seven breakout rooms (compared to its previous three).

Impressive Service

Although its event does not spill over into the convention center, another happy repeat client for the Hilton New Orleans Riverside is Jefferson Financial Inc. The precious metals investment conference has conducted its event at the New Orleans hotel annually since 2009, most recently in October. Emily Coia, MBA,

conference director for Jefferson Financial, says the Hilton staff knows her group well.

"They remember them year after year," explains Coia. "The employees are what make the hotel, and Ingrid Barra, director of event services, and her staff take excellent care of us each year. This year, the hotel was beta-testing group text messaging as the way for planners to communicate with the Event Services team. It was incredibly convenient to be able to summon hotel departments (like security to come lock a space) without distracting from a conversation with an attendee or an exhibitor. And, they are willing to put up with our need to flip seating in our breakout space three or four times a day in order for us to have a variety of options to offer our sponsors."

And Coia loves the Hilton's food and beverage program. "The banquet food is the best I've ever had at a hotel," adds Coia. "The onsite restaurant Drago's is very popular with our attendees. You must try the chargrilled oysters with French bread to soak up the drippings!"

Although Jefferson Financial meets in New Orleans annually, Coia notes several hurdles for her group. "AV costs are a challenge," explains Coia. "While we would like to offer event Wi-Fi, the cost is prohibitive to be able to offer it for our group at this time. And the hotel has done away with its executive lounge, and instead now provides coupons good for a discount on the existing food and beverage outlets. As a planner, I missed the lounge this year, as I rarely have time for a sit-down meal while on-



The Public Belt piano bar at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside.

site. But I think our attendees may like the flexibility of the new options better."

Coia adds that air access to New Orleans also can be a challenge. "Most of our exhibitors come from Canada, and our attendees come from all over the U.S. and the world. There are not a lot of direct flight options since New Orleans is a smaller city."

Improved Airlift

But help is on the way, at least for the air access, as the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY) has set a path for dramatic reinvention. An all new, \$1 billion state-of-the-art terminal for the airport is under construction, and set to open in early 2019. Originally planned for 30 gates, earlier this year the city announced the airport would construct an additional five gates to accommodate increasing demand (the 11.1 million arrivals in 2016 was double the growth projected for the year). And the city has been successful in luring coveted international carriers to begin service: In March, British Airways launched a nonstop flight from London-Heathrow; in May, Condor Airlines debuted a seasonal flight from Frankfurt.

"We have been in the top 10 favorite destinations in U.S. for Europeans, but we didn't have direct service," says Epton. "Nowadays if you want somebody to come you have to give them an incentive, and the new air service from Britain and Germany have been going gangbusters."

Renovations and Restorations

New Orleans has been rolling out restorations and renovations throughout the city, including major infrastructure improvements in the French Quarter.

In 2016, visitors spent \$7.41 billion dollars in New Orleans, a 5.1 percent increase over the visitor spending record set in 2015. The city hosted a record-breaking 10.45 million visitors in 2016, the highest number since 2004 and a 6.9 percent increase compared to 2015. Meeting options appear to be growing apace.

In July, the NOPSI Hotel opened,



The new NOPSI Hotel, housed in a historic building, features a rooftop pool and bar.

the latest project to repurpose one of the CBD's historic buildings. The 217-room luxury hotel is named after the 90-year-old New Orleans Public Service Inc. building, a nine-story brick structure abandoned after Hurricane Katrina. The project's development team worked closely with the State Historic Preservation Office to ensure that the architectural integrity of the building was retained. The hotel offers nearly 14,000 sf of meeting space, including six breakout rooms and a 4,000-sf ballroom located in the adjacent Dryades Building. A 24-foot-high crane and track were preserved as a unique architectural element and focal point for the ballroom. The hotel's rooftop pool and bar is helping to invigorate the city's increasingly hip downtown lifestyle.

In 2016, the Astor Crowne Plaza New Orleans completed a full-scale, \$13 million makeover. All 693 guest rooms were renovated, along with all of the hotel's meeting spaces. The hotel has three ballrooms ranging up to 8,300 sf, and two of the ballrooms have access to balconies. Including breakout rooms, the hotel offers 32,000 sf of meeting space.

The Royal Sonesta New Orleans on Bourbon Street completed a renovation of its 483 guest rooms last year and added a new fitness center and refreshed the hotel's famed Desire Oyster Bar. The Royal Sonesta then embarked on a remodel of its 20,000 sf of meeting spaces, overseen by Atlanta-based Design One

Studio and completed last December. The 5,000-sf Grand Ballroom can accommodate up to 500 for a cocktail reception and is divisible into two spaces. The update also included a state-of-the-art upgraded banquet kitchen and upgraded audio technology for the meeting facilities.

Unique Venues Abound

And this month, the Jung Hotel and Residences will open at 1500 Canal Street, adjacent to the city's medical corridor. A \$140 million reimagination of the historic Jung Hotel, the property features 207 luxury guest rooms, 113 one- and two-bedroom apartments, more than 15 meeting rooms, and a 12,000-sf exhibit hall, along with retail, parking and other amenities.

For the annual sales meeting of a financial client last January, New Orleans-based Kuoni Destination Man-

"The banquet food is the best I've ever had at a hotel. The



Emily Coia, MBA
Conference Director
Jefferson Financial Inc.
Metairie, LA

onsite restaurant Drago's is very popular with our attendees. You must try the chargrilled oysters with French bread to soak up the drippings!"



An on-the-field New Orleans-themed event at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.

Credit: Mercedes-Benz Superdome

agement was tasked with finding an ideal venue for an After Party following an awards dinner. Denise Ferrier Mavor, CMP, regional manager of sales for Kuoni, says New Orleans was selected both for its many hotel options as well

"New Orleans offers such a wide variety of quality restaurants, unique event venues and outstanding entertainment. ...The challenge arises in selecting just one from the many great choices available."



Denise Ferrier Mavor, CMP
Regional Manager of Sales, Central
Kuoni Destination Management
New Orleans, LA

as offsite venues that could create exciting experiences for attendees on three separate evenings. The group used the Hyatt Regency New Orleans as its base hotel, and held its awards dinner here.

"The client planned a multiple-day meeting with offsite events on three nights," explains Ferrier Mavor. "A welcome reception was held at Mardi Gras World where a high school band welcomed guests to the party. Washboard Chaz

Club XLIV, named to honor the victory by the New Orleans Saints in Super Bowl XLIV, offers 18,000 sf of special events space.

headliner Brass-Aholics. Guests dined on Southern favorites, and enjoyed a local craft beer station."

For the After Party, Ferrier Mavor suggested using the SMG-managed Superdome, located next to the Hyatt Regency. While such a large facility would seem to be ill-fitting for a 550-attendee group, the centrally located Mercedes-Benz Superdome offers a surprising variety of event spaces: Turf events are possible outside of NFL season (August through January), there's the 45,000-sf outdoor Champions Square, which features a 60-foot-wide stage, but also indoor function rooms and club lounges.

"Club XLIV (named to honor the victory by the New Orleans Saints in Super Bowl XLIV) was selected for the After Party following the Awards Dinner," says Ferrier Mavor. "The event location needed to be close to the hotel, and have a built-in ambience, a cool party vibe. Club XLIV offers a nightclub atmosphere, complete with a mix of soft seating, eclectic local décor,



Credit: Club XLIV

as well as multiple AV screens for branding and lighting. A DJ was brought in for the music/dance component.

"Located off Champions Square next to the Mercedes Benz Superdome, Club XLIV was perfect for many reasons. Location was a key factor — guests were able to walk from the hotel. The contemporary nightclub décor, seating and beverage service all helped make this decision for the client. While paying homage to the local New Orleans football team, a variety of local art and artists are also featured throughout the club. The modern mix of seating areas created intimate seating throughout, and the addition of a DJ made this the nightclub of choice."

Ferrier Mavor cautions that using the Superdome facilities requires careful advance planning. "Start early. Ask what other events are currently scheduled. It is important to get all of the sales, operations and production teams involved early in the planning process to ensure a smooth show flow and to mitigate unexpected challenges and expenses. When working at Club XLIV, there can be scheduling issues related to the NFL season, NBA season, as well as major concerts and events that require a detailed logistical plan to coordinate all of your event elements."

But Ferrier Mavor adds that the SMG team has the knowledge and experience to assist planners from event conception through execution.

"Jennifer Cooke Talbot, Elizabeth Brown, Tommy Gerace were wonderful to work with. From the sales process through execution, their team was always available and assisted with a smooth setup as well as event. Justin Roux from Centerplate coordinated the beverage service. He did an outstanding job, as always.

"New Orleans offers such a wide variety of quality restaurants, unique event venues and outstanding entertainment options," says Ferrier Mavor. "The challenge arises in selecting just one from the many great choices available." **I&FMM**



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ESCHLE

Tricia Eschle was named director of sales and marketing at The Westin South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, California. She formerly served as director of sales for The Inn at Laguna Beach and The Laguna Beach House in Laguna Beach, California.

Alex Gregory has joined Montage Palmetto Bluff in Bluffton, South Carolina, as director of sales and marketing. He most recently served as direc-



GREGORY

tor of sales and marketing for The Omni Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia.

Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek has appointed **Dawn V. Kingston** as senior sales manager, Midwest market. She was national account manager at Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Itasca, Illinois.

JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort & Spa, Phoenix, Arizona, has named **James**



KINGSTON



ANDERSON

Anderson as director of sales and marketing. He was most recently director of group sales for Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, Texas.

Julie Davis-Petit was named director of sales and marketing for Stonewall Resort, a Benchmark Resorts & Hotels property in Roanoke, West Virginia. She previously served as task force director of events, sales and marketing for Benchmark.



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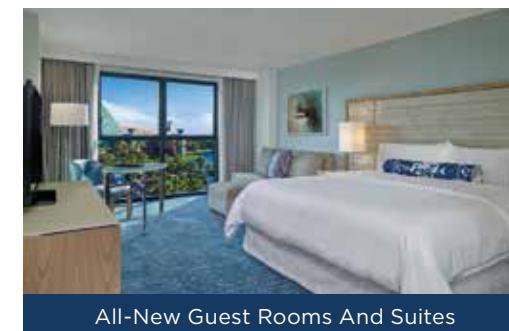


All-New Walt Disney World Dolphin Lobby Concept - Scheduled for completion in September 2017

The Walt Disney World Dolphin lobby will undergo a \$12 million re-design, the final stage of a \$140 million renovation project, the largest makeover in the resort's history. It will be completely transformed into a sleek, contemporary space featuring new food and beverage options and offer an inviting area for guests to relax or network. A recipient of the prestigious Meetings & Conventions Hall of Fame Award, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is a nationally respected and recognized leader in the convention resort arena. The resort offers more than 329,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, 84 meeting rooms, and 2,267 guest rooms and suites which feature the Westin Heavenly® Bed. Attendees can also relax in the luxurious Mandara Spa, indulge in one of our 17 world-class restaurants and lounges or enjoy our unique Disney Differences.



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