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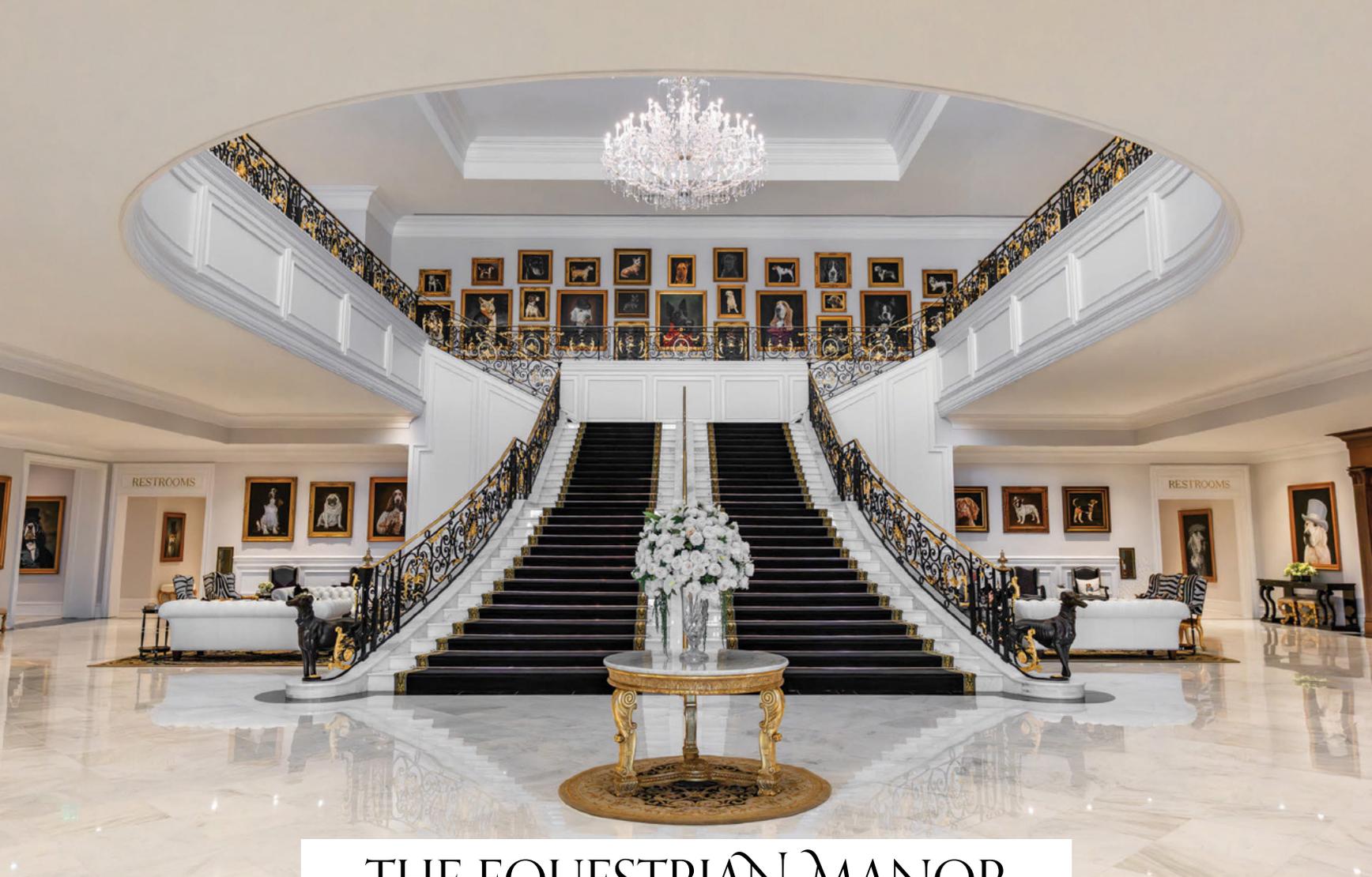
The national planners' resource for Southern destinations

SIMPLY STUNNING THE NEW WOW STANDARD

**HEAD OF THE CLASS:
University Venues
Redefine Conference Hospitality**

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Marketing Tactics to Engage and Impress**



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putting it in perspective

The New Wow Standard

Our April “WOW” issue is a reader favorite for spotlighting standout venues and group experiences that set a new standard for memorable events. From upscale resort hotels to distinctive gathering spaces, and from immersive excursions to one-of-a-kind activities, we highlight some of the South’s most compelling places for groups to gather and explore. This year’s selections showcase venues with captivating light installations, immersive art exhibits, and grand statement pieces, as well as one-of-a-kind curations and eclectic themes. Each offers thoughtful details that can transform an event into something truly exceptional for attendees. Check out the remarkable venues and experiential activities highlighted in our “Simply Stunning” feature, starting on page 6.

In “Head of the Class,” we examine how university venues are redefining conference hospitality through purpose-built meeting infrastructure, access to academic expertise, distinctive campus experiences, and, often, integrated hotel accommodations. Learn about some of the South’s top university venues, featured on page 19. We also look at savvy marketing and promotion strategies designed for long-term success and lasting results. Turn to page 22 to discover how planners and sponsors are reaching attendees by focusing on their personal impressions.

For meetings and events in Florida, our 2026 Event Planners’ Guide to Florida offers exciting updates about hotels, venues, dining, entertainment, and attractions. Read about the Sunshine State’s latest offerings for meetings and events, beginning on page 28.

The *ConventionSouth* team is still basking in the afterglow of our annual Rendezvous South conference, held March 2-5 in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Our special feature on page 25 recounts all the warm connections, exciting activities, and promising opportunities from the incredible event, which drew nearly 200 attendees, including 65 destination teams from across the South and 47 planners. Tonja Taylor with Tonja Taylor Event Solutions describes her experience as a first-time Rendezvous South attendee: “From the pre-event information to the onsite experience, everything at Rendezvous South 2026 was thoughtfully organized and clearly designed to create meaningful connections between planners and suppliers. As a planner, I found the balance of structured appointments and networking opportunities incredibly valuable for holding productive conversations and building authentic relationships. These conversations provided valuable insight into new venues, hotels, and experiences that I can now consider for future programs.”

Don’t miss out on Rendezvous South 2027, March 1-4, in Montgomery, Ala. Reserve your spot early to be part of this in-demand boutique conference for planners and suppliers. Scan the QR code on page 27 or visit RendezvousSouth.com for more information.



Making Meetings Matter More,

Michelle

Michelle Martin
Editor-in-Chief



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Media Group

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Production Offices: 30 Leek Crescent, Suite 201, Richmond Hill,
ON Canada L4B 4N4

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 2267, Gulf Shores, AL 36547

Phone: 251-968-5300; Toll-Free: 800-968-0712; Fax: 251-968-2033

Email: info@conventionsouth.com

Publisher

John MacPherson

Associate Publisher

Tiffany Burtnett

Editor-in-Chief

Michelle Martin

Associate Editor

Helen Jacob

Account Manager

Heather Dougan

Contributing Writers

Nicole Dufour, D. Fran Morley, Lisa Plummer Savas,
Matt Swenson, Paige Townley

Graphic Designer

Alfi Ichwanditio

Circulation Manager

Mei Hong

Production Coordinator

Heather Donnelly

Event & Sales Operations Manager

Ashley Strickland

Editorial Advisory Board

Joe Bocherer, CCO, Georgia World Congress Center Authority
Brian Ferrell, CMP, DMCP, founder & CEO, factor 110
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Editorial Director

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Matthew Buckstein

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SIMPLY STUNNING

Wow attendees with these venues and experiences **6**

Courtesy The Kessler Collection



Courtesy Auburn University

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Head of the Class

University venues redefining conference hospitality



Rob Greer/Courtesy Red Velvet

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New marketing tactics to engage and impress your audience



Courtesy Shoreside Productions

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Rendezvous South

Highlights from our 2026 event in Myrtle Beach, S.C.



© Getty Images

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On the cover: Union Station in Washington, D.C. Courtesy Union Station

Celebrating the Career of an Industry Legend

A conversation with Dean Miller of Visit Fairfax



Courtesy Visit Fairfax

Industry veteran Dean Miller has helped shape hospitality and events in Fairfax County, Va., for more than 35 years. Following his early roles in hospitality sales for local hotels under the Embassy Suites, Hyatt, and Hilton brands, he joined the newly established Visit Fairfax in 2005 as the organization’s first salesperson. Now beginning the new journey of retirement, Miller reflects on his incredible 35-plus-year career, sharing valuable insights for the next generation.

How has your role evolved since joining Visit Fairfax as the organization’s first salesperson in 2005?

Although my official title is national sales manager, I’ve morphed from a sales representative into much more of a consultant, advisor, and teacher—not only to the planners we work with but also to our stakeholders, industry partners, and the Fairfax County community. In the beginning, I fielded inquiries, sent out leads to our hotels, and conducted site tours. Now, I advise local hotels and attractions on their sales and marketing strategies, lead training classes for their sales teams, speak at industry conferences, write articles, help formulate our overall sales and marketing plan, arrange meetings between industry partners, and head up joint sales efforts with other DMOs in Virginia.

In what areas do you think you have had the biggest impact on Fairfax County as a meetings destination and on Visit Fairfax’s approach to hospitality?

Being in the marketplace, sharing a consistent message for more than two decades has helped enhance Visit Fairfax’s position. I’ve had the same e-mail, office number, and cell number throughout my time at Visit Fairfax, which is a huge advantage. Consistency is a big plus.

Which events stand out as defining moments for you and/or for Fairfax County, and why?

Landing the Adult Fans of Lego convention in 2006 was Visit Fairfax’s first win. The folks who ran the convention were so impressed by the service we provided that they gave us a 3-by-3-foot Lego version of our logo, which is still displayed in our lobby. We also hosted the World Police and Fire Games in 2015, a large sports competition featuring more than 10,000 first responders.

Seeing the county evolve into a much more urban destination with much greater mass appeal has been very satisfying. Today, we’re a far

more compelling destination than we were 35 years ago, with enhanced mass transportation (the Metrorail extension to Dulles Airport), entertainment facilities (Capital One Hall), and museums and attractions (the National Museum of the United States Army).

What is the greatest professional takeaway that will continue to serve you personally in your retirement?

I was truly blessed to work with an outstanding group of colleagues and mentors over the years at Visit Fairfax. We all got along well and worked as a team. This is something of a cliché, I know, but I’ve worked at other places where teamwork was hard to find. Wherever you’re headed in the world, the people with whom you’re traveling are far more important than the destination!

What legacy do you hope to leave behind for Visit Fairfax and for Fairfax County hospitality?

From the very beginning, we’ve tried to deliver a higher level of service and attention. Other destinations have more meeting space or different attractions, but I like to think Visit Fairfax goes above and beyond for planners and groups. I believe this will continue to be Visit Fairfax’s guiding mission as a DMO.

Would you like to share any pearls of wisdom or tried-and-true tips for the next generation of event sales professionals?

Yes, I have shared these “5 Simple Keys to Success in the Professional World” with a group of new college graduates; unfortunately, many young professionals today overlook these important practices.

Learn to return phone calls—promptly, every time, every day. If people know that you’ll get back to them, they are more likely to want to work with you.

RSVP to invitations. If you can’t commit to attending, RSVP your regrets. If things change, you can revise your RSVP. Don’t make people chase you down for a response.

Show up on time. This should be basic, but it isn’t.

Learn to be concise and to condense as needed. Whatever plan, proposal, or concept you’re working on, communicate it in a well-written, concise e-mail. Unless it’s a complex topic, you should be able to convey your points on a single (printed) page. Folks don’t have the time for a lengthy dissertation.

Become an “expert” on a particular topic or point of interest. Get to know everything you can about it—speak about it at meetings, volunteer for panels, and write articles for industry publications. In my case, I became known as an expert on reunions, which significantly raised Fairfax County’s profile as a reunion destination.

Regardless of what you’re selling or who your audience is, look for ways you can be of service. Look for opportunities to help people rather than just make a sale. 🍀

SIMPLY STUNNING

THE NEW WOW STANDARD



By Paige Townley

In the world of meetings and events, “wow” isn’t just a nice-to-have anymore—it’s the expectation. Today’s attendees arrive with high expectations, seeking not just a comfortable room or a functional ballroom, but experiences that surprise, delight, and leave a lasting impression. From boutique hotels showcasing captivating light installations and immersive art exhibits to venues featuring grand statement pieces, one-of-a-kind curations, and eclectic

themes, planners are finding that the bar keeps rising. Venues and destinations are answering the call, reimagining spaces, programming, and activities to deliver moments that wow. In a competitive market where first impressions matter more than ever, attention to detail, creativity, and extra touches separate the extraordinary from the ordinary. These hotels, venues, and experiences aren’t just keeping pace—they’re leading the way.

Hotels

Casa Monica Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection | St. Augustine, Fla.

Perched in the heart of historic St. Augustine, Casa Monica Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection delivers the kind of unforgettable setting that planners and attendees dream about. With 138 guest rooms and suites, this landmark property blends old-world elegance with modern functionality.

Inside, the design feels curated rather than cookie-cutter, with rich textiles, architectural detail, and layered finishes. Art isn’t an afterthought here; it’s woven into the fabric of the resort, turning lobbies, lounges,

and common areas into visual destinations in their own right. An onsite gallery and rotating collection add another level of interest, offering built-in conversation starters between sessions or over cocktails.

For planners, the meeting space is equally compelling. Casa Monica Resort & Spa offers more than 12,000 square feet of flexible space, from the 3,600-square-foot Casa Monica Ballroom to the 1,800-square-foot Flagler Ballroom and boardrooms. Outdoor options like the Pool Deck and Sultan’s Pavilion bring fresh-air appeal to receptions, breakouts, or cocktail hours.

The DeSoto | Savannah, Ga.

In the heart of downtown Savannah, The DeSoto puts groups exactly where they want to be: surrounded by the city’s iconic squares, architecture, and walkable history. With 246 guest rooms, the hotel is a comfortable home base for meetings that want both convenience and a sense of place.

The DeSoto’s meeting experience is refreshingly functional. Many of the hotel’s larger event spaces are located on the first floor, creating an easy flow for general sessions, breakouts, and meal functions. For a true Savannah “wow” moment, the 15th-floor Harborview delivers panoramic views of the Historic District.

Design is part of the story here, too, with curated art that includes work by SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design) students, adding local creativity throughout the venue. For smaller groups, the hotel’s Bourbon Bar—with more than 150 bourbons—offers a memorable tasting option.



The DeSoto

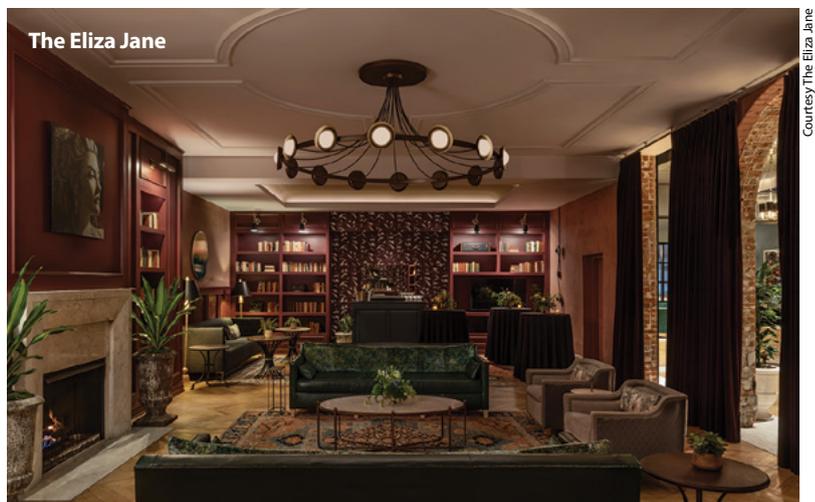
Courtesy The DeSoto

The Eliza Jane | New Orleans

For an experience that feels unmistakably New Orleans, The Eliza Jane delivers. Housed within a collection of restored 19th-century warehouses, this boutique hotel blends history with a polished, modern approach to meetings.

Design is central to the “wow” factor. Exposed brick, original architectural details, jewel-toned interiors, and layered textures create spaces that feel warm, residential, and conversation-friendly—ideal for everything from executive retreats to creative workshops. The hotel’s flexible meeting venues are best suited for small to mid-sized gatherings, with standout spaces like the open-air courtyard, framed by brick walls, tropical greenery, and gaslight lanterns. Holbrook accommodates approximately 150 guests and can open directly to the courtyard for seamless indoor-outdoor flow.

Located downtown, The Eliza Jane puts groups steps from the French Quarter, Warehouse District, and the city’s dining and music—making it easy to build agendas that extend beyond the meeting room.



The Eliza Jane

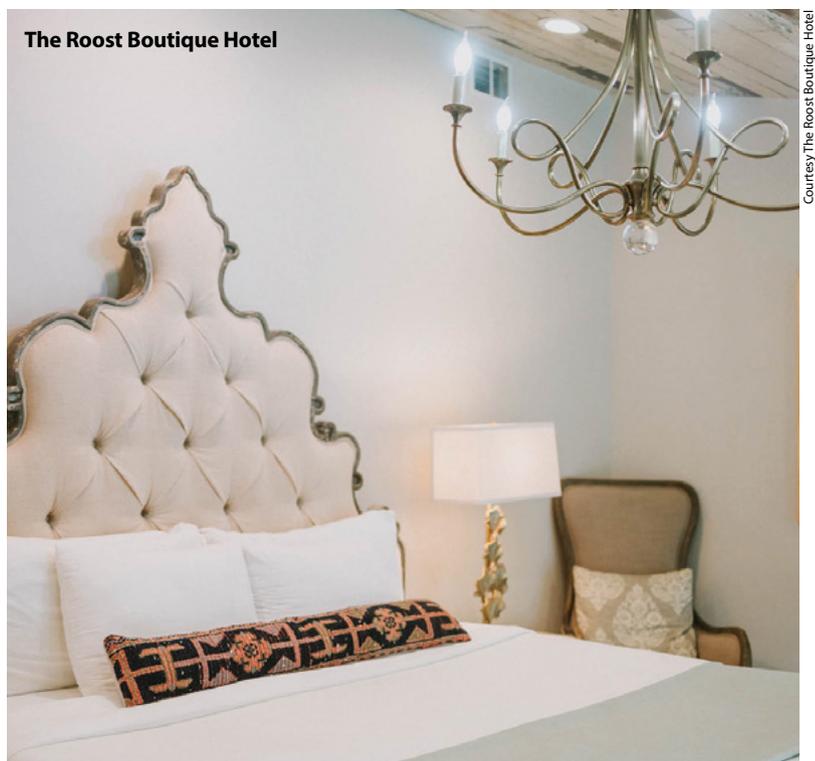
Courtesy The Eliza Jane

The Roost Boutique Hotel | Ocean Springs, Miss.

Tucked into the charm of Ocean Springs, The Roost Boutique Hotel is a Southern hideaway. With just 19 guest rooms, each designed in its own style and size, The Roost offers a highly personal stay that feels more like a beautifully curated home than a traditional hotel.

For small meetings and social gatherings, the property shines in its outdoor spaces. The Butterfly Garden and pool area can host up to 100 guests, creating an easy setting for receptions, welcome events, or al fresco celebrations under the coastal Mississippi sky. Indoors, the upstairs Loft accommodates approximately 40, while a tucked-away speakeasy room offers an intimate option for 20 to 25 guests.

Amenities add to the appeal, from a heated pool to The Wilbur bar. While The Roost feels like a little piece of heaven, it’s still just steps from Government Street and an easy five- to seven-minute walk to the beach.



The Roost Boutique Hotel

Courtesy The Roost Boutique Hotel

Courtesy The National

The National



The National | Oklahoma City

In downtown Oklahoma City, history and luxury share the same address at The National. Housed inside the restored First National Center, a former 1931 bank building listed on the Historic Register, the 146-room hotel is the result of one of the largest renovation projects in Oklahoma's history, and it shows. Original murals, marble columns, decorative ceilings, and even vault doors remain part of the experience, giving events a built-in sense of story and significance.

For planners, the property offers more than 8,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event space across four venues, suited for everything from executive off-sites to receptions. The setting feels grand, but the functionality is modern.

Beyond traditional meeting rooms, The National's dining concepts double as standout private venues, whether it's Tellers for polished dinners, The Vault for a dramatic after-hours event behind original bank doors, or Stock & Bond, where private spaces include a whiskey room featuring more than 500 American whiskeys.

Courtesy Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island

Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island



Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island | Hilton Head Island, S.C.

For planners looking to pair polished meetings with a true coastal escape, Sonesta Resort Hilton Head Island hits a sweet spot. This AAA Four Diamond oceanfront resort recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation, bringing a refreshed, modern beach-house feel to 11 lushly landscaped acres—a setting that feels surprisingly secluded, thanks to live oaks, palms, and winding paths lined with scenic lagoons.

The resort's 23,000 square feet of function space, including two ballrooms and 17 versatile meeting rooms, allows groups to move easily from general sessions to breakout conversations. The redesigned 10,000-square-foot Santee Ballroom, with layered crown molding and crystal chandeliers, adds a dose of wow, while the Oceanfront Beach Pavilion offers a covered, panoramic venue for receptions of up to 600.

Attendees have plenty to enjoy between sessions, including multiple restaurants, two pools, bicycle rentals, a fitness center, full-service relaxation at The Spa at Sonesta, and nearby golf and tennis.

Courtesy Gage Resort & Spa

Gage Resort & Spa



Gage Resort & Spa | Marathon, Texas

Nestled in the high desert of Texas, Gage Resort & Spa offers a mix of historic charm and versatile event spaces that make it a standout for gatherings in need of personality as much as practicality. The property's 48 rooms, including historic hotel rooms and casitas, create an intimate environment perfect for groups from 17 to 100 guests.

Events often center around the Ritchey Building, just across the street, which comfortably holds up to 200 guests. With a kitchen, bar, stage, and projection capabilities, it's ideal for presentations, receptions, and buffet or plated dinners. The outdoor patio and adjacent garden space bring a relaxed, inviting atmosphere for cocktail hours, teambuilding activities, or live music under hanging lights.

For planners looking to integrate the natural surroundings, Gage Resort & Spa shines. From guided river trips and Jeep tours to skeet shooting, yoga, and private spa experiences, the resort leverages its 27-acre gardens and high-desert setting to turn meetings into fully immersive, memorable retreats.

Paroquet Springs Conference Centre

With 40,000 square feet of banquet, meeting and exhibit space, the Paroquet Springs Conference Centre is perfect for group meals, small conferences and trade shows.



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Courtesy Glass Light Hotel & Gallery, Autograph Collection



Glass Light Hotel & Gallery, Autograph Collection

Glass Light Hotel & Gallery, Autograph Collection | Norfolk, Va.

Creativity and functionality collide in downtown Norfolk at Glass Light Hotel & Gallery, Autograph Collection. With 113 guest rooms, this art-infused boutique hotel gives groups an experience that feels authentic to its waterfront city home. What truly sets it apart is the onsite art gallery; the thoughtfully curated space showcasing local and regional artists brings a sense of cultural vibrancy to every stay.

Planners can lean into that creative energy. Whether hosting meetings surrounded by gallery walls or receptions in the art spaces, the gallery elevates events to feel like private viewings. The hotel's dedicated meeting and event venues offer flexible layouts for executive sessions, breakout discussions, and cocktail hours, all enhanced by the inspiring backdrop of original art.

Beyond the gallery, groups can enjoy the property's thoughtful amenities, including a fitness center and a restaurant and bar serving French-inspired New American cuisine, along with easy walkability to Norfolk's waterfront and cultural attractions.

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WOW ISSUE!

Venues

Vulcan Park & Museum | Birmingham, Ala.

For planners seeking something that can't be replicated in a typical hotel ballroom, Vulcan Park & Museum delivers Birmingham at its most iconic. Standing watch over the city since 1904, Vulcan is the world's largest cast-iron statue, and hosting an event in his presence connects guests to the region's iron-working roots.

Vulcan's venue lineup makes it easy for planners to build an experience. The Overlook is a scenic outdoor space with views that stretch for miles, perfect for receptions, networking, or open-air programs. Indoors, the Electra Room features floor-to-ceiling windows, a private patio, a warming kitchen, an enclosed bar, and built-in audiovisual—perfect for meetings, dinners, and polished presentations. With capacities up to 300 and options like private museum access, observation tower entry, customizable statue lighting, and even full-park buyouts, Vulcan is timeless and truly one of a kind.

Sassafras Springs Vineyard & Winery | Springdale, Ark.

Sassafras Springs Vineyard & Winery offers an opportunity to get attendees out of the typical four walls, creating a meeting experience hard to match. With eight distinct event spaces, including several



Courtesy Garrett Photography/Courtesy Sassafras Springs Vineyard & Winery

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outdoors, the property is built for flexibility, whether it's a kickoff party, a leadership retreat, or a full-day meeting.

One of the standout options is the Stables, a large, character-filled space that works for big-picture sessions and can easily transition into smaller breakouts across the vineyard. For more intimate gatherings, the production venue provides an indoor setting for up to 60, making it ideal for guest-appreciation events and smaller corporate meetings.

What sets Sassafras apart is how seamlessly it blends agenda with atmosphere. Teams can meet, step outside for a walk through the vines, and return re-energized—or even add a mid-day wellness moment like yoga. Because wine is made on site, planners can build in behind-the-scenes tours and winemaker-led tastings that feel exclusive, memorable, and refreshingly different from the usual post-meeting cocktail hour.



Gibbes Museum of Art | Charleston, S.C.

Housed in a landmark 1905 Beaux-Arts building—the oldest museum structure in South Carolina—Gibbes Museum of Art gives a sense of grandeur that cannot be replicated in a traditional meeting setting. From the moment guests arrive, the architecture alone sets the tone: elegant, historic, and unmistakably Charleston.

Inside, the museum's various spaces work beautifully for everything from board meetings to multi-floor receptions. The Campbell Rotunda is the showpiece, crowned by a breathtaking stained-glass dome that's become one of the city's most recognizable design details. Just as memorable, the Lenhardt Garden provides an outdoor option inspired by formal French gardens—ideal for seated dinners, tented events, or cocktail-style networking under the Charleston sky.

With reception halls, lecture-ready spaces, classrooms, and the option to incorporate curated gallery access or art-inspired programming, the Gibbes turns meetings into something more.

The Grand Ole Opry | Nashville, Tenn.

For a true “only in Nashville” moment, the Grand Ole Opry is about as bucket-list as it gets. This is so much more than just a venue—it's a living piece of American music history, and hosting an event here instantly elevates the experience from just another meeting to a night attendees will talk about for years.

What makes the Opry especially compelling for groups is the range of ways to build an agenda around it. Groups can host a meeting in one of the Opry's distinct spaces—like Studio A, the legendary television studio where *Hee Haw* was filmed—or take things all the way to the main stage for a full-scale production. Buyouts and private events, including dinner and VIP touches, are available.

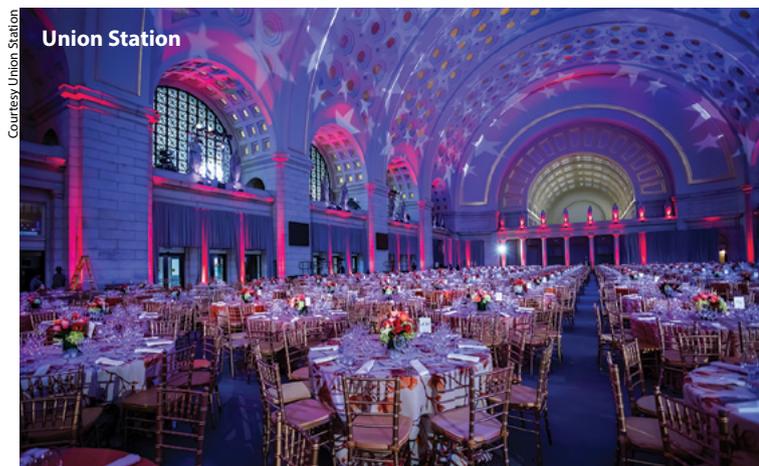
For smaller gatherings, the Circle Room delivers an elevated, behind-the-scenes experience, complete with artist meet-and-greet moments. Add in daytime backstage tours and story-rich spaces throughout the property, and the Opry effortlessly serves as the centerpiece of an unforgettable Nashville program.

Union Station | Washington, D.C.

For a venue that feels unexpected, historic, and undeniably Washington, D.C., look no further than Union Station. Tucked inside one of the city's most recognizable landmarks, this event collection surprises first-time guests with its dedicated, design-forward spaces beyond the public concourse.

Union Station offers four distinct rooms—the Presidential Suite, Columbus Club, East Hall, and the Main Hall (which can also be divided into Main Hall East)—giving planners flexibility for everything from day-long meetings to evening receptions. The Columbus Club is a natural fit for meetings of up to 200 guests, while the Presidential Suite frequently hosts cocktail receptions up to 300. For larger-scale networking events, East Hall accommodates 300 to 700 with ease.

What makes the experience truly memorable is the setting itself; the working transportation hub never stops moving, even as a private event unfolds just steps away. Add in the walkable proximity to Capitol Hill, and Union Station becomes a rare mix of convenience, grandeur, and surprise.





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Experiences

Angel's Envy Distillery | Louisville, Ky. A visit to Angel's Envy Distillery delivers a mix of history, hands-on experiences, and Louisville charm. Groups can dive into the Private Selection Barrel Experience, exploring three barrels under the guidance of the distillery's Single Barrel experts. Guests taste, compare, and discover the subtle differences that make each expression unique before selecting their own barrel—a personalized keepsake that can even be engraved and served at the event.

Beyond the barrel program, attendees can rotate through bourbon, rye, or triple oak tasting stations, take a behind-the-scenes distillery tour, or try their hand at crafting cocktails in a hands-on class.

Angel's Envy Distillery also offers beautiful event spaces for gatherings of 120 to full buyouts for groups of 400.



Courtesy Angel's Envy Distillery

A large promotional graphic for Plano, TX. It features three inset images: two men bowling, a waterfront scene with string lights, and two women sitting on a couch talking. A central orange hexagon contains the text "LET'S GO! PLANO, TX". To the right, a blue background contains the text "IT'S NOT A BUSINESS TRIP, IT'S A BUSINESS DESTINATION." and "In Plano, just north of Dallas, you will discover exceptional hotels, top-tier meeting venues, renowned restaurants, and vibrant nightlife. Save time and money with Visit Plano's inclusive services. Learn more at visitplano.com." The "visitplano TEXAS" logo is at the bottom right.

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TEXAS

Glenn Thompson/Courtesy/ Maritime Museum & Park



Maritime Museum & Park

Courtesy Viking Cooking School



Viking Cooking School

Maritime Museum & Park | Annapolis, Md.

An offsite that rises above the usual group outing is a sailing cruise with the Annapolis Maritime Museum & Park. Aboard the historic skipjack *Wilma Lee*, attendees move slowly across the Chesapeake Bay, taking in unobstructed views of Annapolis’ waterfront, Eastport, and the Naval Academy while guides share stories of the region’s oyster heritage and maritime traditions.

What makes this more than just a scenic break is the vessel itself. Built in 1940 by noted Chesapeake shipbuilder Bronza Parks, *Wilma Lee* is one of the few remaining skipjacks from America’s last commercial sailing fleet, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Viking Cooking School | Greenwood, Miss.

Viking Cooking School offers a deliciously hands-on, interactive experience that brings people together in a relaxed and engaging setting. Their small-group classes—typically designed for approximately a dozen participants—break attendees into teams to prepare a multi-course meal under the guidance of expert chefs. At the end, everyone sits down to enjoy what they’ve made, creating a natural space for conversation, camaraderie, and friendly competition.

For larger groups, the demo-style classes bring the energy of a cooking show to the table. Guests watch the chef prepare dishes while sampling each course, making it an entertaining experience, particularly

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Courtesy The Saint Louis Zoo

The Saint Louis Zoo



for those who prefer to observe rather than cook. With customizable menus spanning cuisines from around the world and techniques suited to all skill levels, Viking Cooking School transforms a standard offsite into a shared culinary adventure.

The Saint Louis Zoo | St. Louis

The Saint Louis Zoo makes it easy to build something genuinely memorable into a meeting agenda. Its behind-the-scenes tours offer small group experiences that allow attendees to take a walk on the wild side and experience nature right in the heart of the city. A standout option is *Gentle Giants*, a 45-minute tour that takes attendees to Red Rocks for the chance to feed the Zoo’s reticulated giraffes and see them up close while keepers share insights into their behavior, diet, and the science behind the giraffes’ famously long necks. Other options range from hands-on time at the insectarium to a tortoise-focused visit, giving planners flexibility based on group interests. The Saint Louis Zoo also offers event venues, which can be scaled for intimate gatherings to large receptions.

Courtesy Kitty Hawk Kites

Kitty Hawk Kites



Kitty Hawk Kites | Outer Banks, N.C.

Kitty Hawk Kites offers an experience that’s both thrilling and distinctive: dune hang gliding at Jockey’s Ridge State Park. Set atop the tallest natural sand dunes on the East Coast, dune hang gliding gives attendees a hands-on taste of flight in the same location where the Wright brothers first took to the skies.

Guided by expert instructors, participants take low-altitude solo flights just a few feet above the sand, making it beginner-friendly while still pushing comfort zones in the best way. The group dynamic adds another layer, as attendees can watch their colleagues soar, cheer them on, and celebrate each successful landing, which naturally fosters camaraderie and shared triumph. Sessions typically run three hours in small groups, combining instruction, multiple flights, and plenty of time to enjoy the park’s sweeping views.

Courtesy Blenko Glass Co.

Benko Glass Co.



Benko Glass Co. | Milton, W. Va.

Planners seeking an offsite experience can take advantage of Blenko Glass Co.’s working glassmaking operation, where guests can watch skilled artisans at work or step into the process themselves.

Benko Glass Co.’s experiences range from quick, hands-on options to more immersive sessions. For groups interested in a simple add-on, Blenko Glass Co.’s stamp-your-own suncatcher experience includes a brief tour and a short, guided interaction at the furnace, with participants creating two pieces to take home. For a deeper teambuilding component, groups can book a blow-your-own experience, which is often centered around Blenko’s most iconic project: the water bottle the company has produced since 1938.

The setting also supports private gatherings, with a museum and observation deck that comfortably accommodate 30 to 40 guests—making Blenko Glass Co. an easy fit for receptions, small group outings, or creative breaks between sessions. 🍷



Head of the Class

University venues are redefining conference hospitality

By Lisa Plummer Savas

While downtown convention centers, full-service conference hotels, and purpose-built event spaces tend to dominate meeting planners' venue shortlists, university facilities are gaining attention. University conference centers offer a combination of assets that is difficult to replicate elsewhere: purpose-built meeting infrastructure, access to academic expertise and distinctive campus experiences, and a price point that often outperforms comparable traditional venues. Some university venues also offer integrated hotel accommodations, streamlining logistics and eliminating the need for shuttles to offsite lodging. Meeting planners who use these collegiate-based facilities consistently point to key advantages: transparent, all-inclusive pricing without surprise costs; student and staff hospitality teams that deliver service with genuine enthusiasm; and campus settings that transform standard conferences into memorable, one-of-a-kind experiences.

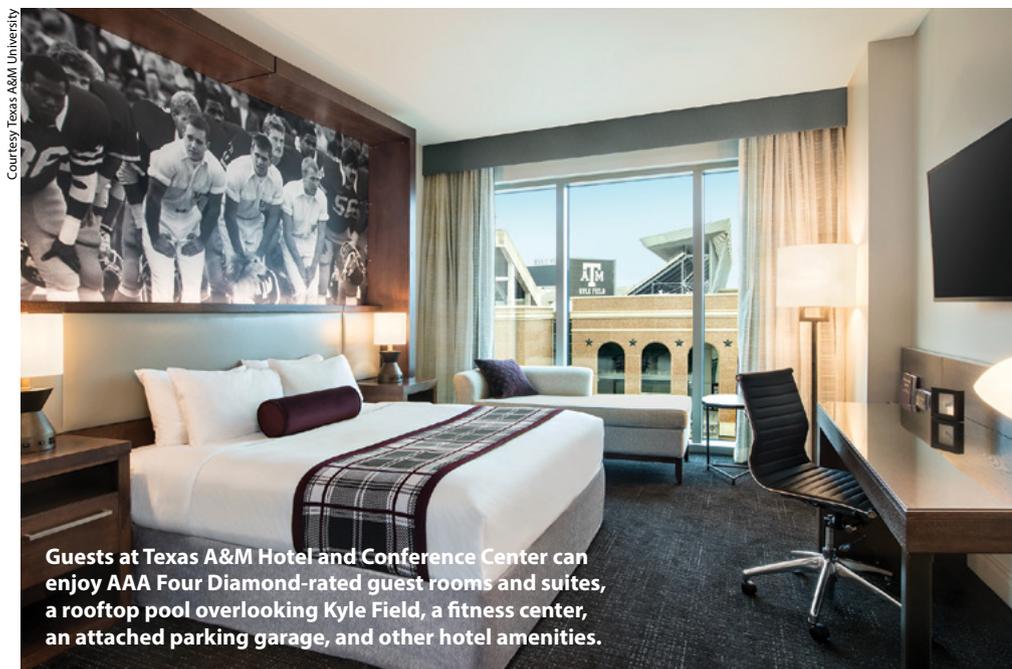
For event groups seeking logistical efficiency, state-of-the-art amenities, budget-friendly pricing, and a sense of place that attendees will remember, university conference centers deserve a serious look. Here, we spotlight three standout university venues—one of which has been recognized as a AAA Four Diamond property and two of which have been certified by the International Association of Conference Centres (IACC), which has set global standards for meeting venue excellence in design, technology, service, and sustainability for more than 45 years. IACC-certified venues represent the top 1% of small to mid-sized conference facilities worldwide. These aren't just academic facilities dabbling in hospitality; they're professional conference operations built specifically for meetings.

The Hotel at Auburn University & Dixon Conference Center | Auburn, Ala. Located in a city that wears its university identity proudly, The Hotel at Auburn

University & Dixon Conference Center has become a meetings destination of choice for organizations across the South and beyond. The AAA Four Diamond property combines professional conference facilities with the energy and hospitality of Auburn's campus culture.

Located on College Street in the heart of the campus, The Dixon Conference Center offers more than 22,000 square feet of flexible meeting space across two ballrooms and 15 meeting rooms, including the 6,100-square foot Grand Ballroom with banquet seating for up to 400 and a tiered auditorium with 356 fixed seats. The hotel's 236 guest rooms and suites connect directly to the conference facility, providing seamless event flow and eliminating logistical friction that can come with offsite accommodations.

The hotel's audiovisual infrastructure includes high-definition displays, upgraded sound systems, wireless microphones, and Zoom- and Microsoft Teams-enabled rooms powered



Guests at Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center can enjoy AAA Four Diamond-rated guest rooms and suites, a rooftop pool overlooking Kyle Field, a fitness center, an attached parking garage, and other hotel amenities.

by Shure IntelliMix technology. A dedicated in-house audiovisual team provides hands-on support before, during, and after every event.

One of the venue's most distinctive advantages is the active employment of Auburn University (AU) students in the hotel's operations; the many international students working at the university hotel comprise a globally diverse service team. "For planners, this translates into a hospitality experience that feels both professional and personal, with staff who bring fresh perspectives, cultural awareness, and a strong sense of pride in representing the university," conference center officials say.

The academic and athletic connections available through AU run deep. As an R1 research university and a member of the Southeastern Conference in 19 intercollegiate sports, AU offers planners access to faculty speakers and unique experiential programming not available through traditional venues. For example, groups can enjoy "War Eagle" experiences designed around the university mascot. The education team at the AU Raptor Center works with the conference center team to accommodate groups of any size, bringing eagles and other raptors for appearances and photo opportunities. "A visit from the Raptor Center is a perfect segue between conference sessions, as a nice surprise and delight for attendees during breaks or receptions," conference center officials say. Planners can also customize group experiences with campus

walks, behind-the-scenes facility tours, and connections to university departments.

The hotel's dining experiences also weave into AU's identity, including the Hey Day Market food hall, which takes its name from a campus tradition dating to 1947, when returning WWII veterans were encouraged to reconnect by wearing name tags and greeting one another. *Ariccia Cucina Italiana*, named for AU's longstanding study-abroad campus in Ariccia, Italy, brings the university's global footprint to the table, while the adjacent Piccolo 241 jazz lounge provides a ready-made venue for informal receptions. For a memorable group dinner and culinary experience, planners can book 1856 – Culinary Residence, the first U.S. teaching restaurant recognized by the MICHELIN Guide. Located inside AU's Tony & Libba Rane Culinary Science Center and operated through the Horst Schulze School of Hospitality Management, 1856 offers seasonal tasting menus with rooftop garden produce, sommelier-led pairings, and custom cocktails. Groups can reserve a 12-seat private dining room, a two-story wine room, or a full 48-seat buyout, available Tuesday through Saturday.

The Utility Technology Association has held two annual events at The Hotel at Auburn University and Dixon Conference Center since 2007 and 2010, respectively. Each event draws more than 400 attendees from electric utilities across the Southeast. Executive director Suzanne Powell appreciates the budget-conscious value the venue delivers.

"Being able to hold the conferences, and the availability of the exceptional hotel rooms under one roof, has been one of the most important reasons for our continued use of The Hotel at Auburn University," Powell says. "The variety of meeting spaces at the Dixon Conference Center has been very beneficial for our number of concurrent educational sessions, along with large auditorium seating and exhibit hall space we require for the events. The sales and conference team provides tremendous value when working with us, arranging the banquet needs for our meals and breaks during the events. Our attendees welcome the ability to walk around Auburn and enjoy dining and drinks at the local restaurants in the evening."

Powell chooses The Hotel at Auburn University year after year for its service, convenience, and value. "Our event attendees feel very welcome at the hotel, and the interaction with the staff is second to none," she says. "The Hotel at Auburn University will be our home for many years to come."

Emory Conference Center Hotel | Atlanta

Tucked into the tree-lined Clifton Corridor on the eastern edge of Atlanta, the IACC-certified Emory Conference Center Hotel at Emory University offers planners a fully dedicated conference environment seemingly removed from the city's hustle, yet still easily accessible to Atlanta's attractions.

Emory University's conference center spans more than 27,000 square feet of flexible event space, including the 5,376-square-foot Lullwater Ballroom; 3,048-square-foot Starvine Ballroom; and 22 purpose-built meeting rooms. Many spaces feature hard walls and floor-to-ceiling windows framing views of the property's private 26-acre nature preserve, a design philosophy inspired by the inimitable architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. The hotel features 325 fully integrated guest rooms, including six one-bedroom suites—so attendees never need to leave the property. Typical group sizes range from 10 to 400 attendees.

A recent major renovation modernized the facility's technology infrastructure, introducing expanded internet bandwidth, built-in cameras and microphones for hybrid streaming, and integrated audiovisual features capable of simulcasting presentations throughout the conference center. "We fully modernized the conference center with state-of-the-art audiovisual technology designed for the needs

of today's modern meetings," says Guido Brun, director of sales for Emory Conference Center Hotel.

The property's location along the Clifton Corridor—adjacent to Emory University, Emory Healthcare, Rollins School of Public Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—makes it a natural hub for health, science, and academic organizations. Emory faculty frequently hold leadership roles within visiting associations, creating organic connections between conferences and university research.

To keep attendees engaged between meetings, planners can incorporate visits to the Michael C. Carlos Museum, which houses the Southeast's largest collection of ancient art; explore the 154-acre Lullwater Park and Preserve, with its walking trails and waterfall; or arrange access to Arts at Emory programming and the nearby CDC Museum.

According to Brun, the IACC's Complete Meeting Package model is central to the Emory conference experience. The per-person pricing bundles continental breakfast, buffet lunch, all-day coffee breaks, meeting room rental, high-speed wireless internet, standard audiovisual equipment, onsite self-parking, and service charges into a single transparent price—making budgeting simpler and reducing unexpected costs.

Lori Spear, executive vice president of the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), has hosted more than 30 events at Emory Conference Center Hotel over the past two decades. "Planning at an IACC facility is significantly easier than at a traditional hotel," she says. "The Complete Meeting Package eliminates countless small decisions, from break snacks to beverage quantities, and includes basic audiovisual services. Having the hotel integrated with the conference center streamlines logistics and makes the entire planning process far more efficient."

Spear says Emory Conference Center Hotel's location and retreat-like atmosphere were an immediate draw. "The location and setting immediately stood out—a serene, wooded retreat that's still conveniently inside metro Atlanta."

The venue's atmosphere is also a key driver of attendee satisfaction, Spear says. "Attendees consistently praise the peaceful setting and nearby walking trails. The outdoor spaces provide a relaxing setting for breaks, and the lobby bar and restaurant offer a cozy

place for informal networking." She adds, "Because the venue is designed specifically for meetings, it naturally enhances engagement and connection."

Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center | College Station, Texas

Situated at the physical heart of Texas A&M University's 5,200-acre campus in College Station, the Doug Pitcock '49 Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center immerses attendees in one of the country's most storied and spirited academic environments.

The conference center offers more than 35,000 square feet of IACC-certified flexible event space, from an executive boardroom and 17 breakout rooms to a spacious, 8,205-square-foot ballroom capable of hosting 300-800 attendees, depending on the setup. Each space is built for modern meetings, with integrated audiovisual technology, abundant natural light, and adaptable layouts.

The hotel's 250 AAA Four Diamond-rated guest rooms and suites—many with views of Kyle Field—are fully integrated with the conference facilities. Experienced onsite event services and audiovisual teams provide hands-on support throughout the planning process and onsite execution. Premium amenities include a rooftop pool overlooking Kyle Field, a well-equipped fitness center, and an attached parking garage.

The hotel's dining portfolio encompasses Brazos – Proper Texas Kitchen, The Rail Bar, Block T Bar & Grill, and The Junction Market & Café. Full-service catering offers customizable menus tailored to different budgets and dietary needs.

"What truly sets our venue apart from traditional conference hotels or convention centers is its setting," says Kendra Clough, director of conference planning and catering at Texas A&M University. "Meetings here don't just happen near campus; they happen within a living, active university environment. Stepping outside our doors places attendees among iconic landmarks, academic buildings, research facilities, and world-class athletic venues."

The experiential possibilities at Texas A&M are extensive. As a Tier 1 research university, the venue can connect planners with faculty speakers and academic panels from across the university's 17 colleges, particularly for leadership, innovation, research, and security-focused conferences. Planners can also arrange

appearances by Reveille, the university's official mascot; performances by the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band or University Choir; or appearances by the Yell Leaders. Additionally, guided campus tours, back-of-house facility tours, visits to Aggie Park, and access to the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum are all within easy reach.

Texas Travel Alliance has hosted its Travel & Tourism College program at Texas A&M every summer since 2021. The three-year certification program draws participants from across the travel and tourism industry, with returning students taking second- and third-year classes.

"When this program started, we held it at a university, and after some time, we changed locations and held the program at a hotel for several years," explains Jennifer Roush, vice president of operations for Texas Travel Alliance. "In 2021, we wanted to bring the 'college' feel back to the program, and Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center was the perfect venue. Everything could be held under one roof, the campus was nearby for any offsite tours, audiovisual equipment was top-notch, and everyone from sales to banquets to bell services has been amazing."

Roush points specifically to audiovisual cost savings as a standout advantage. "The audiovisual costs are very affordable compared to other venues," she says. "The hotel really gets what 'travel and tourism' means and helps us keep costs affordable for our attendees."

Roush also credits individual staff members with elevating the experience, such as concierge Sean Artman: "He is the first person to welcome you when you arrive at the front entrance, wearing his Texas A&M jacket, and he is 'hospitality' down to his core," she says. "From his 'Howdy' as you pass by, to his always being there when you need something, he makes it a top-notch experience from start to finish."

The organization is already booked at Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center through June 2028, and Roush enthusiastically recommends the venue to fellow planners. "I would say to other planners that they should definitely consider a university venue. While there are cost savings, it's also a great learning, hands-on experience for college students working at the venue," she says. "For me, it's about giving back and helping those coming into the industry to learn more, and it provides a great, affordable, unique experience for our attendees as well." 🌟



MORE THAN A FEELING

Event marketing moves beyond traditional metrics to focus on attendees' personal impressions

Rob Greer/Courtesy Red Velvet

By Matt Swenson

As artificial intelligence (AI) and automation stand poised to unlock the potential of face-to-face gatherings, the attendee count is no longer the ultimate benchmark of event success. Just as in consumer products, meeting and event trends are being driven by strategic marketing and promotional campaigns. Whether it's an association seeking to energize its member base or a brand trying to capture consumer and/or employee loyalty, savvy organizations are rolling out strategic campaigns aimed at long-term success.

It's not enough to watch the evolution of a prospect from a registrant to an attendee. With new and emerging tools, event planners can accurately gauge how invested attendees are and predict how their behavior will translate into future interactions, whether they attend in person or virtually.

Conventions and meetings, no matter how consequential to an association's bottom line or corporation's sales strategy, are no longer the end-all, be-all. Event planners and marketers alike are now in the business of creating communities that stay in touch regularly, not annually.

"Event marketing today isn't just about promotion or filling a funnel. It's about building relationships that last beyond a single interaction," says Lindsay Martin-Bilbrey, whose LinkedIn profile emphasizes that her company, Nifty Method, "bridges the gap between marketing, sales, and customer experience through strategic, high-impact live events and hospitality."

According to Martin-Bilbrey, new tools and tactics allow event planners to capture immediate goals, including attendance, while building something bigger. This combination of using technology to gauge, and sometimes steer, human interactions and connections can take events in a whole new direction.

Seeking champions

In event marketing, the baseline should be to secure a registration, according to Dahlia El Gazzar, founder of the Dahlia+ Agency. The goal should be much more, she says.

Your team will know if their strategy is truly connecting with the right audience—attendees who will maintain their relationship with your association or brand for years—during the

"eyes light up" moment. "It is the point where someone does not just register for the event but becomes excited enough to share, comment, or advocate for the event," El Gazzar says.

The job of event organizers is to identify those champions and convince them that your organization provides the type of content they don't dare miss.

If you reach the right individual, a herd may follow, according to Martin-Bilbrey.

"What matters now is how people engage over time, whether they come back, and whether they choose to bring others with them," she says.

Partnerships count

To capture the hearts of your event's participants, the first step is to move past traditional labels like buyers, sellers, and sponsors, says Pablo Zacarias, global events and sponsorship specialist for Aviation-ISAC, a global community of aviation cybersecurity professionals.

"I prioritize open communication, collaboration, and genuine partnership," he says.

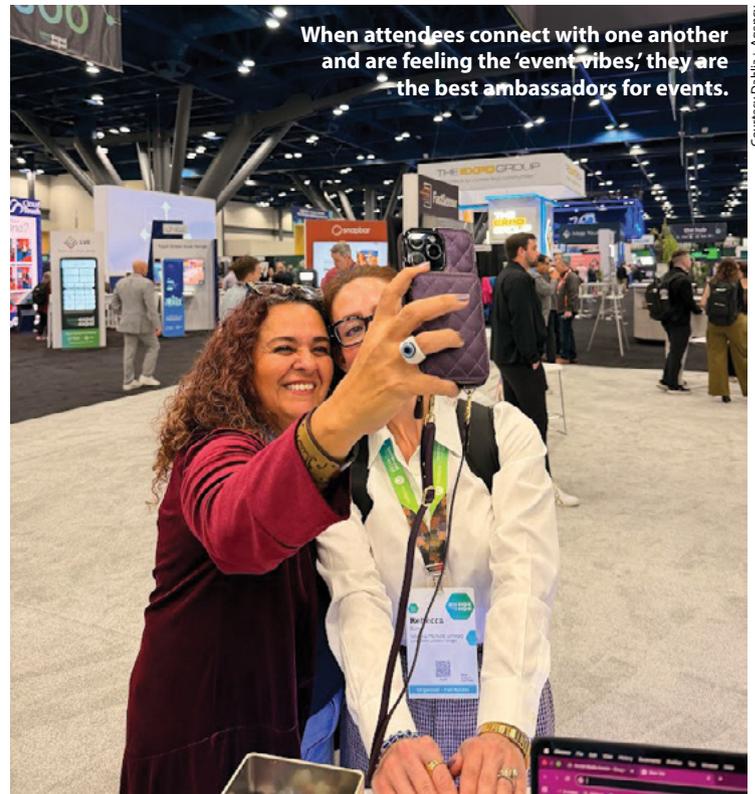
All parties should be invested in the same goal: creating an event that proves worth the time and financial resources put into it.

Courtesy IMEX Group



As this session title suggests, event planners and marketing professionals are trying new tactics to promote in-person events as the peak moment of year-round engagement.

Courtesy Dahlia + Agency



When attendees connect with one another and are feeling the 'event vibes,' they are the best ambassadors for events.

Ken Holsinger, senior vice president of strategy at Freeman event production company, notes in its annual *End-of-Year-Trends Recap*, “The X factor isn’t about creating a moment that looks good on Instagram. It’s about helping attendees walk away saying, ‘That was worth it.’”

To that end, Zacarias actively seeks out destination marketing organizations, convention and visitors bureaus, and venue and hotel partners who work closely with Aviation-ISAC to promote events both locally and regionally. “Collaborating with sponsors, speakers, and partners extends an event’s reach far beyond what an in-house team can achieve alone,” he says. “Partners bring built-in audiences, added credibility, and shared resources, allowing planners to maximize marketing impact while being mindful of budgets.”

In these instances, planners act a bit like a ringmaster, keeping order when chaos is only a few missteps away. “Everyone needs to understand what is in it for them and how their contribution adds value to everyone else. It can be tricky to manage,” says Dax Callner, founder of the nonprofit Experiential Marketing Measurement Coalition. Based in the United Kingdom, Callner consults with many U.S. event clients on experiential marketing.

Making it personal

Emotional investment requires connecting with attendees on a personal level, says Cindy Lo, CEO of the Austin, Texas-based Red Velvet and Strong Events. “People want to be seen and feel heard,” she says.

Lo’s observation tracks with the findings from the Freeman report, which states that attendees cite building vendor relationships, learning and development, and making connections as their top priorities.

El Gazzar refers to the phenomenon as “vibe eventing.” In other words, participants want to “feel” an event more than just attend it. “People are no longer attending events that drain them,” she says. “They are choosing experiences that give them energy, clarity, and confidence.”

Callner says focusing on purpose instead of fancy is important when connecting with your audience. “Despite everyone’s overloaded inbox, I still find a smartly crafted email campaign can be very effective,” he says.

As for social media strategy, Callner advocates promoting on platforms your attendees already use. TikTok could work for a younger attendee base, while LinkedIn’s more professional tone could suit financial and medical industries. “I don’t think anyone can claim a specific channel is universally more effective,” he says.

Always ‘on’

The larger point is to keep the conversation going, says Martin-Bilbrey. An event that interacts with its base sporadically, or when registration season approaches, can be viewed as transactional—a major turnoff when attendees are craving connections. Webinars, virtual town halls, and other digital experiences work in tandem with the grand gathering, she adds.

“The strongest event strategies today treat in-person moments as peaks, not the whole journey,” she says. “Hybrid and virtual touchpoints do the quieter work in between, reinforcing trust, deepening relationships, and making the next in-person moment matter more.”

Despite the many negative aspects of the COVID pandemic, it accelerated a “long-overdue” mindset for events, according to Martin-Bilbrey, who noticed events shift from single-day experiences to ongoing engagement cycles; from attendance metrics to relationship and outcome metrics; and from an emphasis on attendance to outcome. Though livestreaming and recorded event sessions existed for at least a decade prior to the pandemic, the idea of 365-day engagement came into focus during this period of extreme isolation.

“Year-round engagement only works when participants are getting something worth staying for,” Martin-Bilbrey says.

Courtesy, IMEX Group

Creative booths and onsite activations bring an exciting energy level to events, which raises attendees' interest and likelihood of returning.



Lo points to TED Talks as a model for associations and trade shows to expand their reach beyond three days in-person. “How are you capturing the content so that you can provide access to it year-round and, more importantly, make the content evergreen?” she asks.

Attendees will see through ulterior motives, such as caring only about revenue, adds El Gazzar. Whether it’s a webinar, virtual town hall, sales kickoff or large convention, the emphasis must remain on attendees, who are drawn to relevance and practical value, she adds.

“If people leave an event feeling energized, empowered, and ‘seen,’ the downstream value will follow,” she says.

In-the-moment marketing

Because of today’s technology, marketing doesn’t need to be limited to a pre-event or post-conference exercise.

AI has accelerated the turnaround time so much that planners can implement changes in real time. Real-time information about which sessions the attendees have participated in or are

interested in joining helps organizers manage people flow during conferences. An empty session is not only a drag on the event vibe but also a disservice to sponsors. According to El Gazzar, organizers can help fill a potential lull by targeting the types of attendees the sponsors seek through push notifications and other in-event communication. This puts sponsors in a premium position to sell their services to the attendees whose interests are most aligned with their fast-moving campaigns.

“Speed matters because attention is fleeting, and energy is harder to rebuild than it is to maintain,” says El Gazzar. “AI tools are helping event organizers be agile and be proactive instead of waiting another year to implement what they could have done right there at an event.”

She adds, “The days of post-session or post-event SurveyMonkey evaluation links are over.”

Data is everything

While human intuition has its place, the unifying force connecting various event marketing techniques is data. Analytics takes out much of the guesswork.

For example, marketers can measure the success of an email campaign by open rates or the reach of social media posts through impressions. The results can shape which direction your organization heads next, Callner says.

“The lovely thing about campaign data is you can assess it and tweak your approach on an ongoing basis,” he says. “You can A/B test a variety of messages and tactics to see what performs better on an ongoing basis. You can remove stuff that isn’t working and invest more in the stuff that does.”

El Gazzar touts AI for doing much of the analysis for you. Planners and marketers can plug an Excel sheet with virtual and/or in-person registration data or sales information to identify trends that can inform strategies. Unfortunately, she says many planners are focused on demonstrating ROI rather than enhancing an event’s impact. “Most teams collect data to justify what already happened instead of guiding what should happen next.”

Defining success

There is more to marketing than trendy buzzwords like “engagement,” according to Callner, and sticking to the basics is often most successful. “It’s difficult to beat in-person for authentic human interaction, which is at the crux of any event strategy.”

Indeed, buzzwords won’t get event marketers far. According to Freeman’s trends report, attendees are choosing to go to fewer, but more impactful, events. “Attendees are becoming more selective and intentional about where they spend their time,” notes El Gazzar.

ROI is a treacherous acronym that may not serve marketers as well as they think, Callner adds.

“ROI is a financial metric that can’t be credibly measured for the vast majority of events,” he says. “The key with marketing metrics is developing clear goals and targets, and determining as you go if you are meeting your targets.”

Martin-Bilbrey takes that sentiment a step further by describing events as one of an organization’s most powerful promotion tools. “When they’re designed with intention, planned events don’t just support marketing,” she says. “They become one of a firm’s strongest channels for marketing, sales, customer experience, and long-term value creation.” 🍷



Rendezvous South 2026

Planners and suppliers connect over intimate, impactful meetings

By Michelle Martin

Rendezvous South made a big splash in Myrtle Beach, S.C., as nearly 200 event planners and suppliers gathered in the coastal destination March 2-5 for ConventionSouth Media Group's annual conference. The 2026 event was hosted by Visit Myrtle Beach, with Embassy Suites by Hilton Myrtle Beach Oceanfront Resort providing conference services and overnight accommodations.

Rendezvous South remains an in-demand conference among industry professionals, attracting 47 planners and 131 suppliers representing 65 destination teams to the 2026 event. Suppliers included representatives from some of the South's top destinations, hotels and resorts, conference and convention centers, and event venues. This year's conference also included a new Vendor Village, allowing planners and suppliers to learn more about Rendezvous South's preferred vendors for furniture rentals,

audiovisual and production services, and event signage and printing services.

Planners and suppliers continue to choose Rendezvous South for its boutique, appointment-based, conversational format. The exhibition-style "pods" featuring cozy lounge seating provide a relaxed setting for informal yet impactful conversations.

Tonja Taylor with Tonja Taylor Event Solutions attended Rendezvous South 2026 as a first-time planner. "From the pre-event information to the onsite experience, everything at Rendezvous South 2026 was thoughtfully organized and clearly designed to create meaningful connections between planners and suppliers," Taylor said. "As a planner, I found the balance of structured appointments and networking opportunities incredibly valuable for holding productive conversations and building authentic relationships. These conversations provided valuable insight into new venues, hotels, and experiences that I can now consider for future programs."

In addition to the meet-up sessions, Rendezvous South 2026 included an awards brunch recognizing *ConventionSouth's* Meeting Planners to Watch and Readers' Choice Award winners. Special guest Cameron Atlas delivered the opening luncheon keynote address, "The Edge of Possible: Unlocking Potential in a World of Rapid Change," adding some live music for fun. The Australian native, who now lives in Austin, Texas, shared strategic tips to help planners and industry professionals embrace change as a constant, move beyond fear, and take bold, decisive steps into the unknown. "Having a vision for an event and bringing it to life is beautiful, but sometimes it requires external insights to identify where you went wrong and what you are missing," he said, adding, "With so many moving parts and infinite tools, you have to remove the noise and focus. Get clear. Be bold. Be relentless. To achieve the extraordinary, all of these steps have to work together. Being bold and relentless won't work without a clear vision."



Meet-up sessions allowed planners and suppliers to share what they each offer for future events.

On Tuesday, March 3, attendees headed to Big Chill Island House at Barefoot Landing for the evening networking reception. Afterward, attendees were invited to enjoy Myrtle Beach’s local flavors during a “dine-

Rendezvous South 2027
Montgomery, Ala.
March 1-4, 2027



Don’t miss out on Rendezvous South 2027 in Montgomery, Ala. Scan the QR code below for registration information and to reserve your spot.



Rendezvous South also offered many opportunities for planners, suppliers, and vendors to enjoy casual conversations and connections through fun activities and networking events at some of Myrtle Beach’s top restaurants and attractions. The kick-off

cocktail reception was held Monday, March 2, at the Black Drum Distillery’s Seaside Vista ballroom, located at the Embassy Suites resort, followed by the opening reception at RipTydz Oceanfront Grille & Rooftop Bar, located on the iconic Myrtle Beach Boardwalk.

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around” of the many restaurants at Barefoot Landing. Attendees returned to Embassy Suites for after-hours Singo, a music-based Bingo game—and crowd favorite—held at Seaside Vista ballroom. For the closing reception on Wednesday evening, March 4, attendees showed off their best swings at Topgolf.

Through the evening activities, attendees experienced Myrtle Beach firsthand as an event destination.

“Events like Rendezvous South play an important role in showcasing Myrtle Beach as a premier destination for meetings, conventions, and group travel,” said Bob Harris, executive vice president of group sales for Visit Myrtle Beach. “By welcoming influential planners and decision-makers directly to our community, we create opportunities for them to experience firsthand the world-class accommodations, venues, and hospitality that make the Grand Strand such a strong choice for future events. Visit Myrtle Beach appreciates the opportunity to welcome the Rendezvous South community to the Grand Strand and looks forward to building on the connections and momentum created during the event.”

At the end of the closing reception at Topgolf, *ConventionSouth* publisher John



Attendees enjoyed fun teambuilding and networking at Topgolf and other Myrtle Beach attractions.

MacPherson announced Montgomery, Ala., as the host destination for Rendezvous South 2027. Aquan Robinson, senior director of destination development and convention sales for Experience Montgomery, is excited to bring Rendezvous South to Alabama’s capital city: “Rendezvous South is about relationships and discovery, and Montgomery is the kind of place where both happen naturally,” he said. “Montgomery punches way above its weight as a meetings destination. We have the infrastructure planners need, but what really sets

us apart is the sense of place: the history, culture, and people. All of that creates meetings that feel meaningful, not just transactional.” Robinson adds, “Attendees can expect unforgettable experiences that only Montgomery can offer, from riverfront gatherings and whitewater adventures at Montgomery Whitewater to immersive visits at the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Montgomery is a destination where venues have a unique story, and experiences connect people to something bigger.” 🌱

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The Sunshine State remains a powerful global destination for events and meetings, effortlessly combining world-class infrastructure with outstanding leisure amenities. Much of Florida's appeal lies in its wide range of offerings—from numerous high-tech convention centers in Miami and Orlando to prestigious, often secluded luxury resorts in the Florida Keys and on the Gulf Coast.

EVENT PLANNERS' GUIDE TO

FL

Florida

BY NICOLE DUFOUR & D. FRAN MORLEY



The Daytona Beach area offers more than 12,000 lodging options, many of which are located on its beautiful coastline.

Pensacola/Pensacola Beach/ Perdido Key

VisitPensacola.com; @VisitPensacola

With a walkable, historic downtown and award-winning beaches, the Pensacola Bay area is a perfect niche market for smaller meetings, according to VisitPensacola.com.

Larger venues include downtown's recently updated Pensacola Bay Center, with 12 meeting rooms and more than 20,000 square feet of arena floor space to seat 2,000 theater style; the 1,086-seat Center for Fine and Performing Arts at the University of West Florida; and National Aviation Museum, which can host 2,000 guests for receptions. The Museum of Commerce, part of the Historic Pensacola collection of museums, parks, and homes, can accommodate up to 250 reception guests indoors, with additional outdoor space.

Recently updated, the 275-room Hilton Pensacola Beach has 14,894 square feet of event space, including a 700-person-capacity

ballroom. The 206-room Holiday Inn Resort Pensacola Beach Gulf Front can seat 170 theater style; 117-room SpringHill Suites by Marriott Pensacola Beach has a theater-seating capacity of 120; and 137-room Hilton Garden Inn Pensacola Airport – Medical Center has 4,383 square feet of function space.

Santa Rosa County/ Navarre Beach

GetRelaxing.com; @RelaxInNavarre

Navarre Beach in Santa Rosa County is Florida's most relaxing place, says Julie White, tourist development director for the county. "With sugar-white sands, clear turquoise waters, and the longest public fishing pier in Florida, we offer understated beauty and endless water views that encourage relaxation and reconnection."

There are approximately 3,000 lodging units in the county. The 161-room SpringHill Suites Navarre Beach features 3,000 square feet of

meeting space for up to 140 guests. Adventures Unlimited has teambuilding and group retreat facilities with cabins for up to 70 people. Coldwater Gardens, an agro-tourism destination, can accommodate 80 banquet guests across multiple outdoor venues.

Outdoor adventures include Navarre Beach Sea Turtle Conservation Center, Gulf Islands National Seashore, snorkeling near artificial reefs, and kayak and paddleboard rentals.

South Walton County

WaltonCountyFLTourism.com;

VisitSouthWalton.com; @SouthWalton

South Walton is more than the beach, says Karen Morris, CMP, CDME, director of sales for Walton County Tourism. "We have 26 miles of sugar-white beaches, but we also boast four state parks, a 15,000-acre state forest, and 200 miles of hiking and biking trails. South Walton has the venues, attractions, and flexibility to welcome meetings of all sizes."

The 590-room Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa has 40,700 square feet of function space, including the 800-person-capacity Emerald Ballroom. The 2,400-acre Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort has 1,000 lodging options across condominiums, villas, townhomes, and luxury rental properties, and offers 85,000 square feet of event space; the 250-room Hotel Effie, within Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, can accommodate up to 1,200 people for receptions. The Pearl, a 60-room luxury hotel in Rosemary Beach, has indoor and outdoor venues to accommodate 120 guests. Embassy Suites by Hilton Destin Miramar Beach has 6,000 square feet of meeting space, and WaterColor Inn has 5,500 square feet of event space. Camp Creek Inn opened in 2025 as a 75-room boutique hotel, offering indoor space for groups of 50 people and outdoor event space for up to 300 guests. Resort amenities include beach bonfires, pickleball, a wellness center, and golf.

Dining options in South Walton County include Seagar’s Prime Steaks and Seafood at Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, the only AAA Four Diamond steakhouse in northwest Florida.

Destin-Fort Walton Beach

DestinFWB.com; MeetInDestinFWB.com; @DestinFWB

Destin-Fort Walton Beach offers unique excursions, including a chance for divers to explore the world’s largest artificial reef: the *SS United States*, a 990-foot ship scheduled to be sunk in the Gulf of Mexico in spring 2026, according to DestinFWB.com.

“Our destination is very versatile,” says Aline Ibanes, chief sales manager for Destin-Fort Walton Beach CVB. “We have beachfront hotels, rustic barns, a convention center, and even an equestrian arena. We also have the best and freshest seafood, with restaurants that have their own boats to bring the best fish to the table.”

The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center has 32,000 square feet of multipurpose space, including a ballroom seating 2,350 people theater style. The 30,000-square-foot Bayview Plaza and a separate terrace offer additional event options.

Newly opened, The Northend is a new event venue with indoor and outdoor spaces to accommodate up to 200 guests.

Four Points by Sheraton Destin-Fort Walton Beach has 3,780 square feet of function space;

the 152-room Holiday Inn Resort Fort Walton Beach has meeting space to accommodate 250 guests; and the 178-room Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach has a 5,000-square-foot conference center.

Emerald Grande at Harborwalk Village offers one- to four-bedroom condo units and a variety of meeting spaces, including the Grande Ballroom, which accommodates up to 180 guests, and a 25-person-capacity yacht. Henderson Beach Resort has nearly 30,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor function space. The Island Resort at Fort Walton Beach has 24,000 square feet of event space to accommodate groups of up to 400 people.

Panama City Beach

VisitPanamaCityBeach.com; @Visit_PCB

Panama City Beach features a range of resorts and group-friendly venues with 27 miles of sugar-white sand and an easy-to-plan meetings environment, according to Jayna Leach, senior vice president and chief marketing officer of Visit Panama City Beach. “Planners and attendees return year after year because it’s easy to turn a conference into a vacation,” Leach says. “Our accessibility, approachable pricing, and walkable entertainment areas appeal to planners, while groups enjoy waterfront dining, outdoor adventures, and family-friendly attractions, such as the new Topgolf and Dolly Parton’s new Pirates Voyage Dinner & Show.”

★ See State Spotlight

City	Map Location
Amelia Island.....	H2
Bradenton Gulf Islands.....	F6
Clearwater/St. Petersburg/St. Pete Beach.....	F5
Daytona Beach.....	H3
Destin-Fort Walton Beach.....	B2
The Florida Keys ★.....	H9, I9
Florida's Paradise Coast: Naples/Marco Island/ Everglades.....	G7
Fort Lauderdale/Broward County.....	I7
Fort Myers—Islands, Beaches & Neighborhoods.....	G7
Gainesville.....	G3
Greater Miami & The Beaches.....	I8
Indian River County.....	I5
Jacksonville and the Beaches ★.....	G2
Kissimmee.....	H5
Lake County.....	G4/G5
Ocala/Marion County ★.....	G3
Orlando ★.....	H4
The Palm Beaches ★.....	I7
Palm Coast & The Flagler Beaches.....	H3
Panama City Beach.....	C2
Pensacola/Pensacola Beach/Perdido Key.....	A2
Polk County.....	G5
Port St. Lucie/St. Lucie County & Stuart/Martin County.....	I6
Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach.....	G6
Santa Rosa County/Navarre Beach.....	B1/B2
Sarasota/Sarasota County.....	F6
Space Coast: Melbourne, Cocoa Beach & Cape Canaveral.....	H4
St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches ★.....	H3
South Walton County ★.....	B1/B2
Tallahassee.....	E2
Tampa Bay Area.....	F5, G5



Located on Okaloosa Island and just steps from white-sand beaches, Gulf waters, and local attractions, Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center features 32,000 square feet of multipurpose space.

Recently opened, Margaritaville Beach Cottage Resort features 109 beach cottages, resort-style amenities, and 3,000 square feet of function space. Boardwalk Beach Hotel & Convention Center has 40,000 square feet of function space, including a 3,000-person-capacity ballroom; the 255-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Panama City Beach features more than 15,500 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space; and SpringHill Suites by Marriott Panama City Beach Beachfront includes 10,898 square feet of function space. The Panama City Beach Event Center at Edgewater Beach & Golf Resort has 32,700 square feet of flexible event space, including a ballroom seating 1,500 theater style.

Panama City Beach's "Fun for All" initiative works to make beaches and attractions accessible to all visitors. Recent enhancements include expanded beach access with new ramps and beach wheelchair programs, as well as accessible dolphin cruises and snorkeling experiences.

Tallahassee

VisitTallahassee.com; @Visit_Tally

Home to Florida State University (FSU) and Florida A&M University, Florida's capital city of Tallahassee offers a "Pretty. Unexpected" experience, according to Janet Roach, director of meetings and conventions for Visit Tallahassee. "We defy the typical Florida stereotype, offering a seamless blend of sophisticated legislative and academic environments with an air of serene, natural elegance," Roach says. "Planners return for our unique offsite venues and culinary scene that prioritizes independent, chef-driven authenticity."

Larger event spaces include Donald L. Tucker Civic Center, with a 34,000-square-foot exhibit hall and a 12,500-person-capacity arena, and Augustus B. Turnbull III Florida State Conference Center on the FSU campus, with nine breakout rooms and an auditorium seating up to 325 people. Florida A&M's event spaces include the historic 1,190-seat Lee Hall auditorium.

The 242-room DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Tallahassee has 10,494 square feet of function space, including a ballroom seating 200; 117-room Hotel Duval, Autograph Collection has five event rooms to accommodate up to 250 guests; and 154-room AC Hotel by Marriott Tallahassee Universities at the Capitol can seat 300 guests theater style. The AC Hotel's Charlie Park Rooftop lounge offers private dining and reception space for up to 200 guests.

Key areas of the city include College Town, bordered by Florida A&M University and FSU, with restaurants, bars, live music, and event venues; Railroad Square Art District, with more than 70 studios and creative spaces; Market District, an upscale retail area; and downtown, anchored by the Florida Historic Capitol Museum and the current State Capitol, with a 22nd-floor observation deck that is open to the public.

North Florida

Amelia Island

AmeliasIsland.com; @VisitAmeliasIsland; @AmeliasIslandFlorida

On Florida's northeast coast, Amelia Island surprises and delights planners because it delivers far more than expected from a

destination of its size, with a safe and walkable historic downtown and uncrowded beaches, says Paul Beirnes, vice president of Amelia Island CVB. "Our intimate scale removes the stress and logistical challenges of larger markets while still offering world-class resorts, distinctive venues, and a culinary scene that consistently exceeds expectations. Amelia Island is not just an alternative; it is a destination that keeps planners coming back."

Set on 13 miles of Atlantic shoreline, The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island has 446 guest rooms and 113,836 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space to accommodate groups of up to 1,500 people. The Omni Amelia Island Resort & Spa has more than 400 oceanfront guest rooms and suites, plus 80,000 square feet of meeting space across 30 meeting rooms and additional outdoor venues. The resort is expected to complete a full renovation of all guest rooms and meeting spaces this spring, following last year's full renovation of the pool area, lobby, and spa. In addition to championship golf, the resort also features a 10-hole short course. The dual-branded Courtyard by Marriott Amelia Island and SpringHill Suites by Marriott Amelia Island offers a total of 239 guest rooms and more than 7,500 square feet of event space.

New in 2025, The Preserve at The Amelia Island River Club has more than 10,000 square feet of multipurpose event space. The Pavilion in Fernandina Beach offers covered outdoor space to accommodate 120 guests, with additional open-air space.

Daytona Beach

DaytonaBeach.com; @DaytonaBeachFun; @DiscoverDaytonaBeach

For meetings or groups, Daytona Beach offers a community vibe rather than a large-city feel, with accessibility and affordability, according to Brenda Redmon, director of sales for Daytona Beach Area CVB. "Daytona Beach International Airport (DAB) is only a few minutes' drive from most oceanfront hotels," she adds.

This month, the Ocean Center Convention Complex (OCCC) expects to complete its \$40 million renovation in celebration of its 40th anniversary. "Upgrades include new arena seating and arena floor, LED lighting, sound system enhancements, and new interior and exterior paint," Redmon says. Located across the street from the beach, OCCC offers more

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than 200,000 square feet of event space, including a 42,000-square-foot arena seating more than 9,000 guests, a 93,000-square-foot exhibit hall, a 14,000-square-foot ballroom seating 1,540 people theater style, and 32 meeting rooms.

Jackie Robinson Ballpark (where the baseball legend played in the first integrated Major League Spring Training game, in 1946), will debut a 30,000-square-foot player development facility, new clubhouses and club seating, indoor batting cages, and infrastructure improvements in time for the 2026 season. Redmond suggests the ballpark for teambuilding, along with the Tiger Woods-affiliated PopStroke mini-golf, high-speed driving thrills at the NASCAR Racing Experience at Daytona International Speedway, and the new Rainforest at Daytona Aquarium & Rainforest Adventure.

With approximately 12,000 guest lodging options, Daytona Beach offers prime meeting and event space, much of it right on the beach. The 744-room Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort, located directly across from the OCCC and connected to the Ocean Walk Shoppes, features 60,000 square feet of event space for up to 2,000 guests; 200-room Hard Rock Hotel Daytona Beach offers 20,000 square feet of meeting space, including an 8,300-square-foot terrace; and The Shores Resort & Spa has 212 guest rooms and 20,000 square feet of event space, including a ballroom seating 765 theater style. Also, the 435-room Daytona Grande Oceanfront Resort offers 12,000 square feet of meeting and event space; 110-room El Caribe Resort & Conference Center includes 10,000 square feet of space across 12 event rooms; and the 190-room Renaissance by Marriott Daytona Beach Oceanfront Hotel has 12,370 square feet of function space. Near the Speedway, the 144-room DAYTONA Autograph Collection Hotel offers 12,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, including a terrace overlooking Victory Circle at ONE DAYTONA, a shopping, dining, and entertainment destination.

Daytona International Speedway has more than 120,000 square feet of function space and 75 luxury trackside suites. The Museum of Arts & Sciences can accommodate 400 people for receptions or 265 for seated dinners; the historic Daytona Beach Bandshell is suitable for up to 5,000 guests; and Peabody Auditorium seats 2,545.

St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches

FloridasHistoricCoast.com;

#FloridasHistoricCoast; #StAugustine

Florida's Historic Coast, so named for the nation's oldest city, St. Augustine, founded in 1565, offers an unparalleled experience, according to Craig Schoninger, director of tourism promotion and strategic alliances for St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors and Convention Bureau (VCB). "Our charming downtown, ancient forts, and historic hotels provide an inspiring backdrop for meetings and events," he says. "With 42 miles of pristine, accessible beaches, we're a haven for outdoor enthusiasts. For those seeking luxury, Ponte Vedra Beach is home to some of the finest resorts and golf facilities in the country."

The region offers 7,255 guest rooms. Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa has 514 guest rooms and 107,235 square feet of function space, including Champions Ballroom, which can seat 1,600 theater style. The 301-room World Golf Village Renaissance St. Augustine Resort has 45,161 square feet of event space and a seating capacity of 3,000 guests theater style. Historic Ponte Vedra Inn & Club offers more than 20,000 square feet of indoor function space to accommodate up to 450 guests; it is expected to add new sports and surf clubs in early 2027. The Lodge & Club Ponte Vedra Beach has 13,000 square feet of indoor event space across seven rooms. Ponte Vedra Inn & Club and The Lodge & Club Ponte Vedra Beach both include outdoor event spaces. Additionally, the historic 138-room Casa Monica Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection features 20,776 square feet of event space; 217-room Embassy Suites by Hilton St. Augustine Beach Oceanfront Resort has 23,311 square feet of function space; and 120-room Hyatt Place St. Augustine / Vilano Beach includes meeting space to accommodate 450 guests theater style. Guy Harvey Resort St. Augustine Beach's event spaces include a ballroom seating 180 theater style, a smaller meeting room, and outdoor patio and beach venues.

Gainesville

VisitGainesville.com; @Gainesville

Gainesville and Alachua County are where nature and culture meet, according to VisitGainesville.com. It's home to the University of Florida and top research and medical facilities.

The 248-room Hilton University of Florida Conference Center has 10 event spaces, including a 700-person-capacity ballroom. Sweetwater Branch Inn is a boutique facility with 29 guest rooms and indoor and outdoor space to host up to 180 seated guests or a 250-person reception. The 167-room Holiday Inn Gainesville University Center features a 4,800-square-foot conference center and additional outdoor event space. Best Western Gateway Grand Hotel and Conference Center offers more than 10,000 square feet of function space.

The University of Florida offers classrooms, auditoriums, theaters, banquet halls, and other event spaces.

Jacksonville and the Beaches

VisitJacksonville.com; @Visit_Jax

Hugging the St. John's River and just minutes from the Atlantic Ocean, Jacksonville offers the "The Flip Side of Florida," says Jeanne Goldschmidt, director of sales and services for Visit Jacksonville. "If you're open to something different, in Jacksonville, you'll find a slice of Florida that locals love."

Jacksonville has the largest urban park system in the nation, a nationally recognized art scene, and great affordability, Goldschmidt says. "Plus, we can usually accommodate tight schedules. This is a place to gather, get business done, and get a return on experience well worth the investment."

The city has more than 20,000 guest rooms. According to Visit Jacksonville, Marriott Jacksonville Downtown expects to complete full renovations this summer; it has 344 guest rooms and nearly 13,000 square feet of function space. Also completing renovations this spring, the 193-room Dune House Hotel & Spa (formerly One Ocean Resort & Spa) features 10,000 square feet of event space to host up to 450 reception guests. The newly opened 252-room Hilton Jacksonville at Mayo Clinic includes 21,500 square feet of event space to seat 1,240 guests theater style. Other properties include the 951-room Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, with 116,000 square feet of event space, including 30 meeting rooms; 322-room Southbank Hotel Jacksonville Riverwalk, with 39,425 square feet of function space; and 255-room Marriott Jacksonville, with 19,459 square feet of event space to seat 500 banquet guests. DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Jacksonville Riverfront, DoubleTree



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Panama City Beach attracts planners and attendees for its accessibility, approachable pricing, and family-friendly entertainment, dining, and recreation options.



by Hilton Hotel Jacksonville Airport, and the recently renovated Crowne Plaza Jacksonville Airport each offer approximately 10,000 square feet of event space.

The Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center features 78,000 square feet of exhibit space, 22 meeting rooms, a 600-person-capacity ballroom, and a grand lobby that can accommodate 900 guests for receptions. Additional venues include the 300-person-capacity Conference Center at the Jacksonville Main Library; University Center at the University of North Florida, with numerous meeting rooms and a hall seating 710 people theater style; and Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens, with a variety of indoor and outdoor venues for up to 500 guests. The zoo's new J. Wayne and Delores Barr Weaver Manatee River habitat is expected to open in mid-2026.

Ocala/Marion County

OcalaMarion.com; @OcalaMarion

According to OcalaMarion.com, Marion County offers kayaking, tubing, boating, and world-class sports facilities, including more than 700 horse farms with a long legacy of breeding, raising, and training Triple Crown winners and other champions. Some farms offer tours, riding, and regular events.

The World Equestrian Center (WEC) features the luxurious 248-room Equestrian Hotel and the 390-room Riding Academy Hotel. The Equestrian Manor, the center's newest addition,

has more than 303,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, including a 10,500-square-foot ballroom. WEC also features two expo centers, each offering 132,300 square feet of contiguous multipurpose event space.

The 196-room Hilton Ocala can host up to 600 event guests in its largest event space.

Circle Square Commons includes space to seat 1,330 theater style. College of Central Florida has space to accommodate 491 in classroom seating. Southeast Livestock Pavilion has 16,491 square feet of versatile space.

Palm Coast and The Flagler Beaches

VisitFlagler.com; @VisitFlagler

Palm Coast and The Flagler Beaches offers an alternative escape from the nearby hustle and bustle, says Amy Lukasik, executive director of Visit Flagler. "We provide a laid-back 'Old Florida' experience for all ages to enjoy, so we're a great destination for event attendees who want to bring their families."

There are approximately 1,108 guest rooms in the region. Set on 11 oceanfront acres, Hammock Beach Golf Resort & Spa has 275 traditional guest rooms, plus condominiums, villas, and The Lodge, a 20-room boutique hotel. The resort includes a waterpark and two award-winning golf courses; offers customized teambuilding activities; and features 50,000 square feet of function space, including the

Grand Event Lawn, which can accommodate 500 guests for receptions. The 121-room Hilton Garden Inn Palm Coast Town Center has 3,880 square feet of meeting space across six rooms. Newly opened, the 100-room Compass Hotel by Margaritaville in Flagler Beach has a small meeting space for up to 30 guests.

Central Florida

Indian River County

VisitIndianRiverCounty.com;

@VisitIndianRiver

Indian River County, including Vero Beach, Fellsmere, and Sebastian, offers uncrowded beaches and a blend of charm and history, says Ben Earman, vice president of tourism and marketing for Visit Indian River County. "We pride ourselves on our culture and being a welcoming destination for all."

Vero Beach is known for its pristine 22.4-mile-long coastline, free of high-rise properties. "The town blends posh hotels, swanky boutiques, local restaurants, and world-renowned galleries and theaters," Earman says. "Fellsmere is a rural utopia, with undeveloped wildlands and thriving natural habitats, and Sebastian is a lively riverfront town with a range of attractions and activities."

The county offers approximately 2,217 guest rooms. The 109-room Kimpton Vero Beach Hotel & Spa features more than 3,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space. Costa d'Este Beach Resort & Spa in Vero Beach has 94 guest rooms, including a 1,000-square-foot penthouse suite, and 2,200 square feet of indoor meeting space to accommodate 100 guests. Vero Beach Inn & Suites has 114 recently updated guest rooms, a 40-person classroom, and a banquet hall seating 200. The 86-room Capt Hiram's Resort in Sebastian has three conference rooms, a riverfront room seating 150 for dinners, and a beach venue for up to 100 guests.

Kissimmee

ExperienceKissimmee.com;

@ExperienceKissimmee

Kissimmee is the "big, bold heart of Florida," says Michelle Moore, CDME, CMP, HMCC, CHIA, senior director of meeting sales and services for Experience Kissimmee. "We are just 25 minutes from Orlando International Airport (MCO), with a great selection of meeting

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hotels and amazing opportunities to weave central Florida experiences into events to make memorable experiences and turn your business trip into a getaway.”

There are more than 25,000 hotel rooms in Kissimmee and more than 300 event venues.

The former Wyndham Orlando Resort & Conference Center Celebration Area is now Holiday Inn Resort Kissimmee by the Parks, offering 420 guest rooms and 30,000 square feet of event space. A 122-room Hyatt Studios with 3,000 square feet of meeting space is slated to open later this year at Kissimmee Gateway Airport, an executive airport for private and corporate aviation. Homewood Suites by Hilton Celebration, which broke ground in July 2025, is expected to offer 128 studio, one- and two-bedroom suites once completed. According to Experience Kissimmee, both Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate and Margaritaville Resort Orlando have announced plans to expand meeting space in 2027 and beyond.

The 1,718-room Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center features 519,242 square feet of function space, including a newly completed \$158 million expansion that added additional breakout rooms, ballrooms, and the Florida Exhibition Hall, which can accommodate 10,000 guests. The 1,005-room Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

includes 255,000 square feet of event space. Margaritaville Resort Orlando has 265 guest rooms and more than 300 villas, plus 40,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor event space and island-inspired teambuilding activities; the 317-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Orlando Sunset Walk has indoor/outdoor event space for up to 144 guests; 300-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista South has 25,955 square feet of function space, including the Palms Ballroom with seating for 1,980 theater style; and 420-room Holiday Inn Resort Kissimmee by the Parks has 30,000 square feet of function space. Also, Reunion Resort & Golf Club includes condos, townhomes, and vacation homes, along with 25,000 square feet of function space, while the 718-room Delta Hotels Orlando Celebration has 13,327 square feet of event space.

Brightline offers high-speed rail throughout central and south Florida, with a primary hub at Orlando International Airport, and SunRail provides a direct connection from downtown Kissimmee to downtown Orlando.

Lake County

DiscoverLakeFL.com;
@DiscoverLakeCountyFL

Lake County offers a refreshing take on central Florida and surprises people in the best way, according to Ryan Ritchie, director of Discover Lake County Florida. “We’re just 30

minutes from Orlando, but worlds away—with historic downtowns of Mount Dora, Tavares, and Eustis, rolling hills, and more than 1,000 lakes,” Ritchie says. “It’s a place where natural beauty and authentic Florida experiences take center stage, creating a setting that feels both relaxed and distinctive.”

There are approximately 3,000 guest rooms in the county. Mission Resort + Club has 176 guest rooms, 30,000 square feet of event space, two award-winning golf courses, three restaurants, and a spa. The boutique hotel Citrus on the Lake has a new rooftop venue (the county’s only rooftop bar). Historic Howey Mansion hosts retreats and social gatherings, with an indoor ballroom seating 80 guests or up to 1,000 when combined with an outdoor tent.

Orlando

VisitOrlando.com; OrlandoMeeting.com;
@VisitOrlando

Orlando’s continued growth sets it apart, year after year, says Casandra Matej, president and CEO of Visit Orlando. “With the highly anticipated start of construction at the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) and capital investments at Orlando International Airport, the destination has entered a new era of meetings and service innovation, setting the stage for exciting experiences for years to come.”

Currently featuring 2.1 million square feet of exhibit space, OCCC recently broke ground on its Grand Concourse Expansion, a \$560 million project that will enhance the North-South Building and improve connectivity between concourses. Set to conclude in 2029, the expansion will add 44,000 square feet of meeting space and a 100,000-square-foot ballroom.

The OCCC connects to more than 5,200 guest rooms, including Hilton Orlando, with 249,000 square feet of meeting space; Rosen Centre, with more than 160,000 square feet of function space; Hyatt Regency Orlando, with 315,000 square feet of conference space; and Rosen Plaza Orlando, with more than 60,000 square feet of function space.

According to Visit Orlando, several hotels debuted multimillion-dollar renovations within the last three years. These include the 1,217-room Caribe Royale Orlando, with more than 260,000 square feet of function space; 502-room Waldorf Astoria, with 120,000 square feet of event space; 1,009-room Signia by Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek, with more than 231,000 square feet of space; 998-room JW

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Sprawling 800 acres, the 1,005-room Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate in Kissimmee includes 255,000 square feet of event space, two championship golf courses, tennis/pickleball courts, sparkling resort pools, a waterpark with a lazy river, and a full-service spa.

Marriott Orlando Grand Lakes, with 225,822 square feet of function space; and 247-room Grand Bohemian Orlando, Autograph Collection, with 10,107 square feet of event space.

The new 500-room Universal Helios Grand Hotel, A Loews Hotel features 5,000 square feet of function space and a dedicated entrance to Universal Epic Universe, the first major theme park to open in Orlando in 25 years, while Universal Stella Nova and Universal Terra Luna Resorts added 1,500 guest rooms to Universal Orlando Resort's hotel portfolio. Also at Universal Orlando, Loews Portofino Bay Hotel has 42,000 square feet of indoor and 47,000 square feet of outdoor event space. Loews Royal Pacific Resort and Loews Sapphire Falls Resort share The Loews Meeting Complex at Universal Orlando, which features 247,000 square feet of function space.

Other major conference hotels and resorts include Conrad Orlando, located at Evermore Orlando Resort, with 65,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space; DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at Sea World, with 100,000 square feet of event space; Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, with 126,578 square feet of event space; and Rosen Shingle Creek, with more than 400,000 square feet of indoor and more than 136,000 square feet of outdoor event space.

Walt Disney World Resort has five dedicated convention hotels, according to Disney Meetings and Events, which can help with creative resources, immersive experiences, multimedia production, branding, and more. Top resort hotels include Disney's Coronado Springs Resort, with 223,000 square

feet of event space; Disney's Contemporary Resort, with a 115,000-square-foot convention facility; and Disney's Yacht & Beach Club Resort, with nearly 100,000 square feet of meeting and event space. Disney's Boardwalk Inn has 20,000 square feet of function space, and Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa has 40,000 square feet of event space. This summer, Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is expected to complete a \$275 million renovation and expansion project, unveiling a 120,000-square-foot expansion of the Dolphin's event space.

Polk County

VisitCentralFlorida.org; @VisitCentralFL From golf courses to theme parks, nature parks, and historic sites, Polk County's offerings are as diverse as the people who visit, says Paul Smiley, director of conventions, meetings, and event sales for Visit Central Florida. "There aren't many places where you can watch alligators in the wild in the morning, catch a Detroit Tigers Spring Training game in the afternoon, and spend the evening strolling around Frank Lloyd Wright architecture."

In downtown Lakeland, the RP Funding Center is a multipurpose entertainment and event complex with 100,000 square feet of meeting and exhibit space, a 2,200-seat theater, and an 8,000-seat arena. Adjacent to the center, SpringHill Suites Lakeland features 4,029 square feet of event space. The 128-room Hyatt Place Lakeland Center has 1,000 square feet of function space, and The Terrace Hotel Lakeland, Tapestry by Hilton has 88 guest rooms and 3,185 square feet of function space.

Streamsong Resort offers 228 guest rooms, more than 25,000 square feet of indoor meeting space, 60,000 square feet of outdoor venues, three award-winning golf courses and a short course, a full-service spa, and other amenities. Westgate River Ranch Resort & Rodeo is a Western-themed Dude Ranch with 200 lodging options, including a lodge, cabins, and a rail car, and 16,138 square feet of indoor event space.

Space Coast: Melbourne, Cocoa Beach & Cape Canaveral

VisitSpaceCoast.com; @VisitSpaceCoast

The region's 72 miles of beaches make for a stunning backdrop to near-weekly rocket launches on the Space Coast, according to Meagan Happel, public relations manager for Visit Space Coast. "With the closest beach to Orlando, the Space Coast allows day trippers to take a break from the theme parks and relax, learn to surf, or kayak around animal habitats. Like our name, the Space Coast bridges the gap between advances in technology and space exploration with the wonders of our coastal nature."

The Kennedy Space Center Visitors Complex includes the Heroes & Legends Conference Facility, which can accommodate 500 reception guests; Space Shuttle Atlantis room, with a 1,000-person capacity for receptions; and Gateway: The Deep Space Launch Complex, which can accommodate up to 400 for receptions. Astronaut-led tours and the Astronaut Training Experience provide unique group excursions and teambuilding opportunities.

The 238-room Hilton Melbourne features 18,482 square feet of event space, including a 400-person-capacity ballroom; Radisson Resort at the Port in Cape Canaveral has 30,000 square feet of function space; 296-room Hilton Cocoa Beach Oceanfront includes 11,410 square feet of event space; and 150-room Hilton Garden Inn Cocoa Beach Oceanfront has 14,754 square feet of event space. Hilton Melbourne Beach Oceanfront offers 13,519 square feet of space across eight meeting rooms. Crowne Plaza Melbourne-Oceanfront has 13,760 square feet of function space, including a 500-person-capacity ballroom.

According to Visit Space Coast, the Westin Resort & Spa Cocoa Beach is set to open in May 2027, with 502 guest rooms and 18,000 square feet of meeting space.

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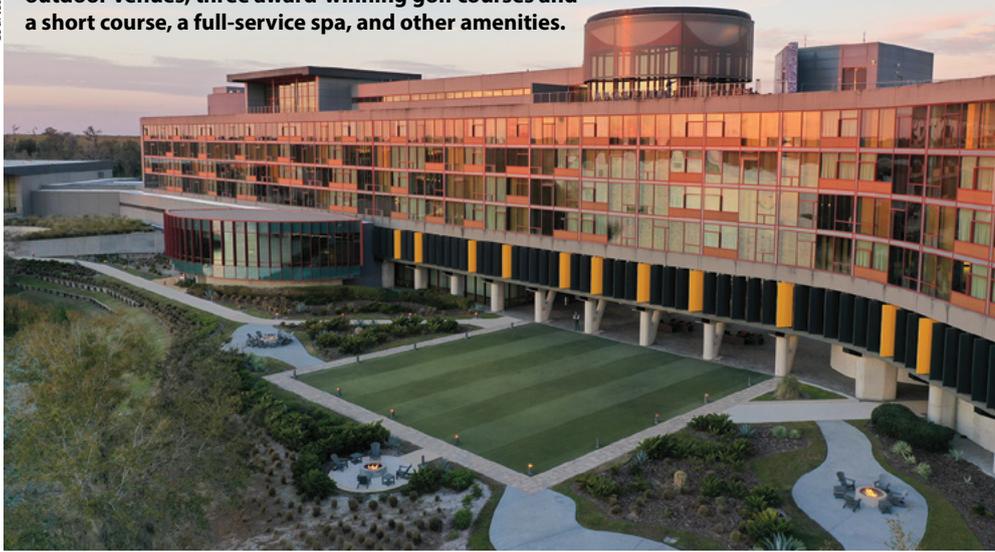
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The 228-room Streamsong Resort, located in central Florida's Polk County, features more than 25,000 square feet of indoor meeting space, 60,000 square feet of outdoor venues, three award-winning golf courses and a short course, a full-service spa, and other amenities.



Bradenton Gulf Islands

BradentonGulfIslands.com;

@Visit_Bradenton

Located north of Sarasota, near the Gulf of Mexico, Manatee County includes the county seat of Bradenton, Anna Maria Island, and Longboat Key. “This is the ‘Authentic Florida,’” says Keenan Singleton, communications manager for Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We offer a nice mixture of sugar-white sand beaches, a flourishing arts scene, and a laid-back, small-town charm. We also have an excellent convention center, which just completed a \$54 million transformation.” Completed in November 2025, the project extended the Bradenton Area Convention Center event space to 95,000 square feet. New features include a 14,000-square-foot ballroom, a 32,000-square-foot exhibit hall, and two outdoor plazas. The convention center adjoins to its headquarters hotel, the Palmetto Marriott Resort & Spa, which opened in April 2024 with 252 guest rooms and 8,908 square feet of event space across eight event/breakout rooms. Hotel amenities include rooftop dining, a spa, an outdoor amphitheater, and access to a private beach club.

Downtown Bradenton attractions include the Avenue of the Arts, the Bishop Museum of Science and Nature, ArtCenter Manatee, and the Manatee Performing Arts Center. Gulf Islands Ferry serves Anna Maria Island, known for its boutiques, art galleries, restaurants, and historic Bridge Street.

Area accommodations include the 110-room Ramada Waterfront Sarasota, with 10,000 square feet of event space; 153-room Courtyard by Marriott Bradenton Sarasota/Riverfront, with 9,446 square feet of event space; 114-room Hampton Inn & Suites Bradenton Downtown Historic District, with 2,390 square feet of event space; and the 123-room Compass Hotel Anna Maria Sound, by Margaritaville Hotels and Resorts, which has indoor and outdoor space for up to 75 people in its largest configuration. Silver Surf Gulf Beach Resort on Anna Maria Island and BridgeWalk resort in historic downtown Bradenton—both Silver Surf resort boutique properties—offer a combined 78 guest rooms. While neither offers event space, the resorts offer other amenities, including spa services and private beach access.

Bradenton is located 12 miles from Sarasota Bradenton International Airport (SRQ) and approximately one hour from Tampa International Airport (TPA).

Clearwater/St. Petersburg/ St. Pete Beach

VisitStPeteClearwater.com; @VSPC

The Clearwater/St. Petersburg/St. Pete Beach area offers planners award-winning beaches and diverse venues accessible via Tampa International Airport and St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport (PIE).

On St. Pete Beach, the 40-acre TradeWinds Island Resorts consists of two properties:

Island Grand at TradeWinds and RumFish Beach at TradeWinds. The adjoining hotels offer a total of 734 guest rooms, 14 dining experiences, a floating waterpark with a three-story waterslide, and 70,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor function space, including the 8,400-square-foot Island Ballroom and a 10,584-square-foot permanent tented pavilion.

On Clearwater Beach, the Opal Sands/Opal Sol resort complex offers 106,000 square feet of event space; its largest space has a capacity of 950 theater style and 800 for receptions. In Palm Harbor, Innisbrook Resort features 485 guest rooms, 80,000 square feet of event space, and four golf courses, including the top-rated Copperhead Course, site of the PGA TOUR's Valspar Championship. Overlooking Tampa Bay in downtown St. Petersburg, the 361-room Vinoy Resort & Golf Club, Autograph Collection features 74,897 square feet of event space across 21 event rooms and 24 breakout rooms. The resort's largest space can accommodate up to 1,000 people seated theater style. Modern beachfront options include the AAA Four Diamond Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach, which can accommodate up to 720 people in its largest space. JW Marriott Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa features 18,546 square feet of event space; its largest venue has a capacity of 600 people. The 286-room Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach Resort and Spa features six indoor and outdoor event spaces; the largest, a 4,000-square-foot ballroom, can accommodate up to 400 people. The outdoor Sky Terrace, overlooking the beach, accommodates up to 300 guests.

In downtown Clearwater, BayCare Sound outdoor waterfront venue can accommodate up to 9,000 people (4,000 covered seats and 5,000 lawn seats). NOVA 535, located in a restored 100-year-old St. Petersburg building, can host up to 775 people in its largest space. Art-filled venue options in St. Petersburg include Dali Museum, James Museum of Western & Wildlife Art, and Museum of Fine Arts. St. Pete-Clearwater offers 50 breweries, Dunedin's waterfront dining, Safety Harbor's MICHELIN-recognized cuisine, and Greek-themed events at Tarpon Springs' Sponge Docks. St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport—approximately 12 miles from both downtowns—offers the new Grouper Airport Express on-demand shuttle service, which runs between the airport and any location on Clearwater Beach, including some resorts.

The breakout session broke out.



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Tampa Bay Area

VisitTampaBay.com;@VisitTampaBay

Tampa Bay combines waterfront sophistication with state-of-the-art functionality for planners looking for flair and impact. “We offer groups an industry-leading waterfront convention center and other world-class meeting facilities, all in proximity to a wide range of outstanding hotels, MICHELIN-rated restaurants, and countless attractions to tempt visitors of all types,” says Santiago C. Corrada, president and CEO of Visit Tampa Bay.

Tampa Convention Center boasts 600,000 square feet of event space, including a 200,000-square-foot exhibit hall with a capacity of 22,857 guests for receptions and 16,000 seated theater style; a 36,000-square-foot ballroom with a capacity of 4,114; and 52 breakout rooms, including 18 new meeting rooms overlooking the waterfront. In addition, the 7,000-square-foot Sail outdoor waterfront space can host receptions for 500. The convention center was awarded LEED Silver O+M Green Building certification in 2025.

Adjacent to the convention center, the 719-room Tampa Marriott Water Street and the adjoining 519-room JW Marriott Tampa Water Street offer more than 120,000 square feet of event space. Other options include the 360-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Tampa Downtown Convention Center, with 11,010 square feet of event space; Hilton Tampa Downtown, with 37,756 square feet of event space; and Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay, with 28,000 square feet of event space. Newer hotel offerings include the 168-room SpringHill Suites by Marriott Tampa Downtown, which opened in 2024. In Ybor City, construction work is underway to transform the circa-1910 Sanchez y Haya building—which once housed cigar workers—into the 11-room Inn at El Reloj boutique hotel. The new Inn at El Reloj is expected to open later this year, also featuring a new restaurant, Elaine’s, and Stanford’s Cigar Club. In the Riverwalk area, the 220-room Pendry Tampa is expected to open in 2027; it will feature three dining experiences and 11,000 square feet of event space.

Recently renovated properties include Westin Tampa Waterside, Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay, Westin Tampa Bay, and Hotel Flor Tampa Downtown, which features The Dan speakeasy. Tampa Airport Marriott, inside Tampa International Airport’s terminal, recently redesigned its 298 guest rooms and meeting spaces.



For a unique setting, the National Polo Center in Wellington offers four venue options to accommodate groups of up to 400 people, along with onsite catering, a florist, and a creative department.

Courtesy Discover The Palm Beaches

Unique venues include the Florida Aquarium, Glazer Children’s Museum, and Tampa Museum of Art. Planners can use Pirate Water Taxi for charters along the Hillsborough River or host buyouts at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay.

Fort Myers – Islands, Beaches & Neighborhoods

VisitFortMyers.com/Meetings; @VisitFortMyers

The islands, beaches, and neighborhoods of Fort Myers in Lee County offer meeting experiences that feel different by design, according to tourism officials. “Natural light and Gulf breezes create a setting where ideas flow beyond the meeting room,” says Natalie Duran, director of sales for Visit Fort Myers. “Our region delivers a true coastal Florida experience without the density of larger markets.”

Fort Myers boasts 230,000 square feet of meeting space and 15,000 guest rooms. The Caloosa Sound Convention Center and Amphitheater in downtown Fort Myers features more than 40,000 square feet of event space; its largest space can accommodate 2,300 guests theater style. The venue connects to the 243-room Luminary Hotel & Co., Autograph Collection, which has 10,834 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space. The hotel’s onsite Oxbow Restaurant is available for private events of up to 150 people.

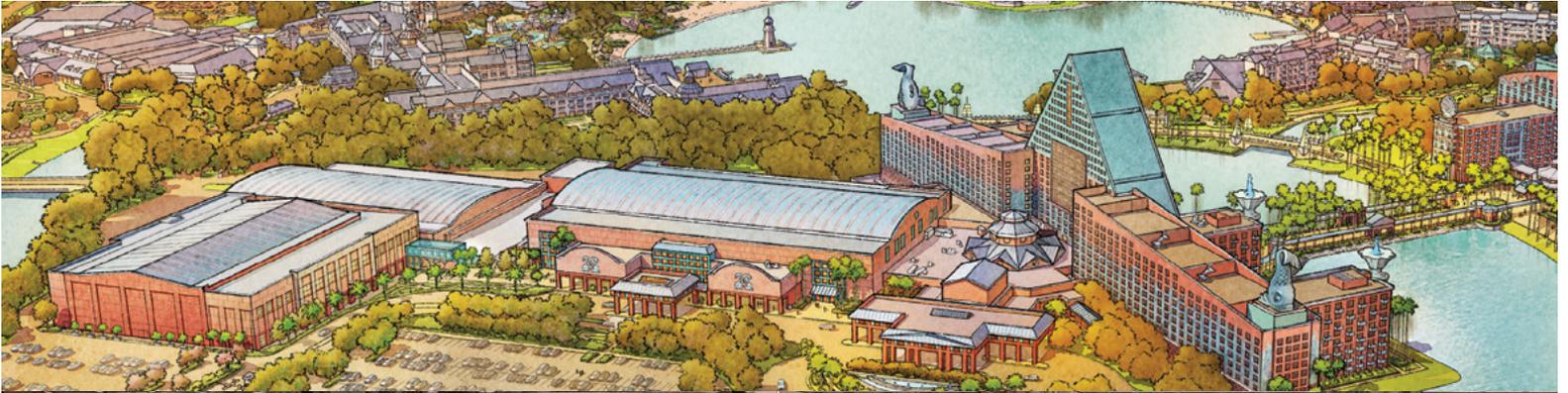
Boca Grande’s 163-room Gasparilla Inn & Club offers various indoor and outdoor function areas for up to 300 people. In Bonita Springs, the 463-room Hyatt Regency Coconut

Point Resort and Spa recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of its 82,000-plus square feet of function space; the resort’s largest space can accommodate up to 1,500 people. The 308-room Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village offers 50,000 square feet of indoor space for up to 1,400 people, while the 347-room Marriott Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa features 45,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space. Margaritaville Beach Resort Fort Myers Beach offers versatile indoor spaces for up to 250 people, as well as outdoor spaces with Gulf views. The 169-room Crowne Plaza Ft. Myers Gulf Coast by IHG recently renovated its guest rooms and 10,000 square feet of function space. Set on 330 acres on Captiva Island, the 424-room South Seas Island Resort offers four event spaces and buyouts at Redfish Grill and Harborside. The resort also features The Beach House restaurant and Captiva Landing waterpark. Additional guest accommodations are available at the newly refreshed Best Western Plus Beach Resort on Fort Myers Beach and at Sundial Beach Resort & Spa, which reopened in 2025 following extensive renovations and expansions after Hurricane Ian in 2022.

Festive group outing options include Swamp Cat Brewing, Slipaway Food Truck Park, and the restored The Whale on Fort Myers Beach, which offers seafood, barbecue, and cocktails. Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) is currently undergoing a multi-phase terminal expansion to enhance the passenger experience for arriving groups.



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Fort Lauderdale/ Broward County

VisitLauderdale.com; @VisitLauderdale

Home to 31 distinct municipalities, including eight unique beach communities, Greater Fort Lauderdale delivers diverse settings and experiences within one destination. “Greater Fort Lauderdale is a unique and memorable destination for meetings and events, offering unmatched natural beauty, accessibility, and vibrant experiences,” says Stacy Ritter, president and CEO of Visit Lauderdale. “With 24 miles of golden sandy beaches and more than 300 miles of navigable waterways, the destination has earned its reputation as the ‘Venice of America’ and the ‘Yachting Capital of the World.’”

Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center recently completed a \$1.3 billion expansion, delivering 1.2 million square feet of space, including 350,000 square feet of contiguous exhibit space and a 65,000-square-foot waterfront ballroom. Other project elements include enhanced water taxi services and, on track to open this month, a pedestrian-friendly waterfront plaza and a signature restaurant. The convention center is just 11 minutes from Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL).

Connected directly to the convention center, Omni Fort Lauderdale Hotel opened in December 2025 with 801 guest rooms and 120,000 square feet of flexible event space. Nearby, the 595-room Hilton Fort Lauderdale Marina provides 31,000 square feet of meeting space and guest shuttle service to the beach. The 361-room Embassy Suites by Hilton 17th Street features 11,300 square feet of event space; its largest venue can accommodate up to 400 guests for banquets. The 650-room Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort & Spa includes more than 50,000 square feet of space, with a capacity of 1,800 people. The reimagined 376-room Pier Sixty-Six Hotel & Marina has 28,670 square feet of indoor meeting and event space, including a 10,000-plus-square-foot ballroom, and 11,177 square feet of outdoor function space; the lawn area can be configured to accommodate 740 for receptions and 400 for seated banquets. Other notable properties include Westin Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort; the boutique Hyatt Centric Las Olas Fort Lauderdale; Hotel Maren Fort Lauderdale Beach, Curio Collection by Hilton; and the AC Hotel by Marriott Fort Lauderdale Airport.

Florida’s Hollywood and Hollywood Beach offer additional options. Margaritaville Beach Resort Hollywood Beach features 369 guest rooms and more than 30,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space. Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Hollywood has 1,271 rooms and 120,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 38,000-square-foot exhibition hall.

Greater Miami & The Beaches

MiamiAndBeaches.com; @VisitMiami

Greater Miami & Miami Beach offers planners high-capacity convention experiences and culturally immersive programming. “Greater Miami & Miami Beach is one of the most dynamic, globally connected meeting destinations in the United States, offering top-notch meeting infrastructure, year-round sunshine, oceanfront settings, and a rich mix of arts, culture, and culinary experiences,” says Carol Motley, senior vice president of convention sales and services for Greater Miami CVB.

The region boasts more than 65,500 rooms across 575-plus properties. The mainland includes downtown Miami, Brickell, Coral Gables, Little Havana, and Little Haiti. Across the bridges, Miami Beach and South Beach offer a walkable, attendee-friendly environment.

Greater Miami boasts six major convention centers. Topping the list is Miami Beach Convention Center (MBCC), which completed a \$640 million renovation in 2020. The venue offers 1.4 million square feet of function space, including four exhibition halls totaling 491,645 square feet and a 60,000-square-foot grand ballroom. The 800-room Grand Hyatt Miami Beach, currently under construction and slated to open in late 2027, will connect directly to the MBCC; it will offer approximately 90,000 square feet of indoor meeting and conference space, as well as an additional 10,000 square feet of outdoor event space.

James L. Knight Center/Miami Convention Center has 100,000 square feet of event space, including three exhibit halls and 37 meeting rooms. The region’s other convention centers include Miami Airport Convention Center (172,000-plus square feet), Mana Wynwood Convention Center (90,000 square feet), Miami-Dade County Fair & Expo Center (86 acres, including multiple venues and fairgrounds), and Fontainebleau Miami Beach – Coastal Convention Center (45,000 square feet), which accommodates 2,300 in its largest indoor space.

In addition to the new Grand Hyatt Miami Beach development, the region’s hotel and resort offerings have experienced many other updates. Last December, Loews Miami Beach Hotel unveiled a \$55 million redesign of the hotel’s 790 guest rooms and suites, along with a refresh of the hotel’s restaurants, bar, and sushi bar. The historic Miami Beach Art Deco hotel, The Shelborne By Proper completed a \$100 million renovation last year; the hotel features 30,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space. Andaz Miami Beach debuted in 2025 with 25,000 square feet of event space and a unique hydraulic pool floor. Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne, Miami unveiled a \$100 million renovation late last year. The 289-room Hilton Miami Beach opened last month near Miami Beach Convention Center; the hotel, comprised of four Art Deco buildings, includes two rooftop pools, multiple dining concepts, and 1,898 square feet of event space. The reimagined Delano South Beach offers 171 guest rooms and the 1,000-square-foot, pillarless, natural light-filled Zodiac room.

Miami International Airport (MIA) is undergoing a \$9 billion modernization that, within the next several years, will include a new four-star, 450-room onsite hotel with conference space. Offsite, The Underline linear park is nearing completion, stretching 10 miles through neighborhoods like Brickell and Coconut Grove.

The Palm Beaches

ThePalmBeaches.com; @PalmBeachesFL

“The Palm Beaches offers an enticing combination of natural beauty, world-class hospitality, and extensive meeting infrastructure across 39 distinctive cities and towns, giving planners a variety of options within one accessible destination,” says Kelly Cavers, chief sales officer for Discover The Palm Beaches.

The region offers 20,000 guest rooms and one million square feet of meeting space. Palm Beach County Convention Center in downtown West Palm Beach features 350,000 square feet of flexible space and connects via a covered walkway to the 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach, which offers 35,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor function space. Nearby, the iconic Breakers Palm Beach offers 80,000 square feet of space, which can accommodate 1,600 guests for receptions. Boutique options

include The Brazilian Court Hotel & Beach Club and the Palm House. The new Belgrove Resort & Spa, West Palm Beach, Autograph Collection in West Palm Beach has 18,173 square feet of event space across 10 event rooms. In Delray Beach, Opal Grand Resort & Spa features 30,000 square feet of space. The Opal Collection also includes Atlantic Suites on the Avenue, Delray Sands Resort, and Jupiter Beach Resort & Spa. In Manalapan, the 309-room Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa has 30,000 square feet of event space. Celebrating its centennial anniversary this year, The Boca Raton 907-room luxury resort features 97,000 square feet of event space across 60 venues.

With more than 160 golf courses, The Palm Beaches is considered Florida's golf capital. PGA National Resort in West Palm Beach hosts the Cognizant Classic, a PGA TOUR event. Other annual sporting events include the ATP's Delray Beach Open, MLB Spring Training, and the Winter Equestrian Festival, held at Wellington International in Wellington.

Palm Beach International Airport (PBI) is currently modernizing Concourse B with new dining options and sensory rooms.

Florida's Paradise Coast: Naples/Marco Island/Everglades

ParadiseCoast.com; @ParadiseCoast

Florida's Paradise Coast includes Naples, Marco Island, and the Everglades, three distinctive locations within a 30-minute drive. "We offer the total package: A 30-mile coastline of white-sand beaches, the majestic Everglades, world-class culinary experiences, vibrant nightlife, attractions, upscale shopping, family-friendly attractions, and more," says Lisa Chamberlain, group sales manager for Naples, Marco Island, Everglades CVB.

The region boasts 9,200 guest rooms and multiple venues. JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort features 809 guest rooms and 140,347 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space; its largest space can accommodate 6,300 people. The resort has become a wellness destination for its "Blue Zone-centric" programming, which includes spa circuits, aromatherapy showers, nutrient-rich cuisine, and sea-moss cocktails. Naples Grande Beach Resort has 474 guest rooms and more than 83,000 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor function space across 15 venues. This month, the resort will begin a comprehensive \$100 million renovation of all guest rooms and suites, public spaces, event areas, and other components. While most of the resort and meeting spaces will be closed during the project, several public components—including restaurants, beach services, and tennis facilities—will remain open. The resort is expected to reopen at the end of this year. The Ritz-Carlton, Naples boasts 474 rooms and 78,024 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space. Its sister property, The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, Tiburón, features 31,736 square feet across 17 event rooms. Naples Bay Resort & Marina has more than 13,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, while Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort & Spa offers approximately 7,500 square feet of indoor meeting space and more than 35,000 square feet of outdoor space. Naples' 169-room Innovation Hotel has its own campus, which includes a cutting-edge conference center with eight event spaces, a 40-person private cinema, pre-function areas, and dining options. Inn on Fifth, Naples has approximately 12,000 square feet of event space, and LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort offers 11,500 square feet of event space.

New additions to the Paradise Coast's collection of hotels include the 220-room Naples Beach Club, A Four Seasons Resort, which opened in late 2025 with 32,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space. Reintroduced and rebranded as a boutique property, the circa-1889 Olde Naples Hotel, Opal Collection features 109 rooms, a rooftop pool, and a bistro.

Other group options include Naples Botanical Garden, Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens, and Golisano Children's Museum of Naples. Coming this fall, Seafair's Crystal Grandeur mega-yacht will be available for corporate and private events. The Paradise Coast also offers more than 90 golf courses and outdoor activities in the Everglades.

Port St. Lucie/St. Lucie County & Stuart/Martin County

DiscoverMartin.com; @DiscoverMartin
VisitStLucie.com; @VisitStLucie

St. Lucie County—which includes Fort Pierce, Port St. Lucie, and Hutchinson Island—sits on Florida's Treasure Coast, famously named after a 1715 Spanish fleet wreck that scattered gold and silver offshore. While this maritime history offers a legendary allure, event planners can also explore the area's rich modern venues and unique coastal offerings.

"(Planners) love our uncrowded beaches, thriving waterfront, botanical gardens, museums, spring training baseball, and other unique attractions," says Charlotte Bireley, tourism and venues director for Visit St. Lucie.

MIDFLORIDA Event Center in Port St. Lucie features versatile event space, including two grand ballrooms, an outdoor amphitheater, and festival grounds. The Havert L. Fenn Center offers a 22,700-square-foot exhibit hall with a capacity of 3,200 and six flexible rooms.

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The 169-room Innovation Hotel campus in Naples includes a conference center with eight event spaces, a private cinema, pre-function areas, and dining options.

Part of the Opal Collection, The Lucie in Jensen Beach offers 110 guest rooms and suites, onsite catering, audiovisual-equipped meeting spaces, and beautiful beach views. The new voco Sandpiper All-Inclusive Resort by IHG opened earlier this year following the rebranding and transformation of a former property. The 335-room resort features approximately 18,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, seven restaurant and bar concepts, and other amenities. The resort's first phase of renovations and additions, already unveiled, includes 249 updated guest rooms and two-bedroom suites, enhanced tropical landscaping, and a new 150-person-capacity waterfront event space. A second phase will include renovations to the event space, new dining rooms, and other enhancements. In addition, the 142-room Holiday Inn Port St. Lucie offers 3,080 square feet of space; the 130-room Hilton Garden Inn at PGA Village/Port St. Lucie has more than 3,600 square feet of meeting space for small events; and the 125-room Residence Inn By Port St. Lucie has a small meeting room.

Other venue options include the Historic Tradition Town Hall and Peacock House Art Foundation, both in Port St. Lucie. In Fort Pierce, venues include the Riverwalk Center, Pelican Yacht Club, and Heathcote Botanical Gardens.

In nearby Martin County, Marriott Hutchinson Island Resort & Beach Villas, Golf & Marina boasts more than 30,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor function space. Opal Collection's Hutchinson Shores Resort & Spa in Jensen Beach has 178 guest rooms and suites, as well as more than 8,000 square feet

of indoor and outdoor event space. For marina-based stays, Pirate's Cove Resort and Marina in Stuart offers event space to accommodate up to 300 guests. Other options include Courtyard by Marriott Stuart and Hampton Inn & Suites Stuart-North, both of which accommodate smaller groups.

Punta Gorda/ Englewood Beach

PureFlorida.com; @RealPureFlorida

Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach on Florida's southwest coast is a premier eco-tourism destination, offering more than 100,000 square feet of event space and 2,470 guest rooms. The area is accessible via Punta Gorda Airport (PGD), Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW), Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, and I-75 and U.S. 41.

Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center features 44,000 square feet of space, including a 20,000-square-foot main hall (capacity 1,517) and the 18,000-square-foot Great Lawn.

The 785-room Sunseeker Resort Florida Gulf Coast, Curio By Hilton boasts more than 63,000 square feet of event space across 22 meeting rooms. Palm Island Resort, south of Manasota Key, offers 160 units with private beach access and elegant indoor and outdoor event venues. The resort can also help groups organize teambuilding activities, including golf, tennis, and fishing tournaments. Other options include the 106-room Four Points by Sheraton Punta Gorda Harborside, which has an onsite tiki bar, a full beach volleyball court, pool tables, bicycles, foosball, and live music;

other amenities include an onsite comedy club, a salon, spa, and restaurant. The recently renovated 63-room Wyvern Hotel offers event space for small gatherings. One of the area's favorite gathering spots is Perch 360, a rooftop bar and restaurant overlooking Punta Gorda and Charlotte Harbor.

"We like to say that our best side is outside," says Robyn Price, senior sales manager for Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor and Convention Bureau. Babcock Ranch Eco-Tours offers custom swamp buggy tours, which take groups on immersive 90-minute journeys into "Old Florida." Tours cover 14,000 acres of a historic working cattle ranch with four distinct ecosystems, including the prehistoric Telegraph Cypress Swamp.

Sarasota/Sarasota County

SarasotaMeetings.com;

@VisitSarasotaCounty

"Sarasota has a way of staying with people," says Suzanne Hackman, director of sales and industry relations for Visit Sarasota County. "It's not just the sunshine or the beaches—it's the creativity, the culture, and the relaxed sophistication that turns a meeting into an experience."

The 266-room Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota features 60,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space; its largest venue can accommodate 1,200 guests. Overlooking Sarasota Bay and downtown, Westin Sarasota features 255 guest rooms and 12,131 square feet of function space across seven rooms. Late last year, Hyatt Regency Sarasota was demolished to make way for the new 174-room Hyatt Centric Harborside, now under construction. The new hotel is expected to open in 2028 with 7,000 square feet of event space. Coastal resorts include the 168-room St. Regis Longboat Key, which has more than 31,000 square feet of event space, and Opal Collection's 229-room Resort at Longboat Key Club, with 12,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space, which includes a 5,256-square-foot ballroom with a capacity of 583 seated theater style.

Other venue options include Sarasota Municipal Auditorium, with a capacity of 1,200 guests (or 850 seated theater style). Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium has several venues, including the 10,000-square-foot Exploration Hall, which features a 400,000-gallon aquarium and accommodates

up to 900 people in theater-style seating. The iconic Ringling Museum, once the winter estate of circus tycoon John Ringling, features various architecturally significant spaces and Italian Renaissance courtyards; the entire campus can accommodate 1,600 guests for events. The Ora, located on 32 acres and 10 minutes from downtown Sarasota, has 30,000 square feet of event space, including a nearly 10,000-square-foot ballroom.

The Florida Keys

VisitFloridaKeys.com; @TheFloridaKeys

According to Ed Simon, executive vice president and chief sales officer for Visit Florida Keys & Key West, his corner of the Sunshine State—the legendary chain of coral islands known as “The Keys”—is unmatched in its ability to make visitors feel removed from daily life while remaining accessible and productive. “Groups meeting and celebrating here can combine business with immersive, remarkable experiences,” he says. “They can host productive sessions in the morning, then shift effortlessly into snorkeling on living coral reefs, fishing excursions, eco-tours and activities, or visiting our historic sites, and end the day with sunset sails and waterfront dinners.”

The Keys offers 19,000 guest rooms, with new properties opening across the island chain and many properties undergoing major renovations and rebrands. On Key West, the new Lunara Bay has 26 waterfront homes with private pools and concierge service. Lunara Bay’s Solaire, a collection of four uniquely designed homes, offers 30 private guest rooms and 8,340 square feet of “catering-ready” waterfront event space. The 114-room Islander Resort completed a property-wide transformation last year, which included renovations to bungalows and villas, the addition of new dining experiences, and updates to seaside sport amenities; it includes 19,000 square feet of indoor space with a capacity of 1,000 people. In 2023, the historic 311-room Casa Marina Key West, Curio Collection by Hilton completed an \$80 million transformation, which included updates to guest rooms and the addition of a 5,000-square-foot oceanfront lawn for events; the hotel has 41,000 square feet of event space. In the historic downtown, the 160-room La Concha Key West, Autograph Collection recently restored its façade and lobby. In 2024, Islamorada’s former Post Card Inn and Pelican Cove became one resort destination, now known as the 214-room Three Waters Resort & Marina, a Tribute Portfolio property; it features 80,000 square feet of event space and a full-service marina. In Marathon, Faro Blanco Resort & Yacht Club became Faro Blanco Resort Marathon, Florida Keys, Curio by Hilton. The five Key West Historic Inns, previously branded by Kimpton, are now independent historic inns and guest houses managed by Davidson Hospitality.

Other options include Islamorada’s Cheeca Lodge & Spa, which features 254 luxury units and more than 82,000 square feet of venues, including The Keys’ largest ballroom. Ocean Reef Club on Key Largo has 247 guest rooms and more than 25,000 square feet of event space. Also on Key Largo, the 200-room Baker’s Cay Resort, Curio Collection by Hilton features 14,706 square feet of event space. On Duck Key, the 427-room Hawks Cay Resort boasts 20,000 square feet of space for up to 644 attendees seated theater style. The 293-room Southernmost Beach Resort on Key West features four indoor and outdoor meeting spaces with a capacity of 200 people, while the 186-room Margaritaville Beach House Key West offers 4,000 square feet of event space. 🍹



Visit The Florida Keys & Key West



Courtesy Visit The Florida Keys & Key West

Groups can experience the ultimate island meeting experience in The Florida Keys. The region’s five destinations—Key Largo, Islamorada, Marathon, The Lower Keys, and Key West—showcase their own unique character while delivering flexible spaces, modern amenities, and personal service. Planners can choose from luxurious resorts to charming boutique properties, laid-back coastal fare to fine dining, and incredible excursions and activities, like eco-tours, dolphin encounters, deep-sea fishing, snorkeling, and kayaking. Commercial flights are available via Key West International (EYW) and Miami International (MIA) airports, with road travel along the 110-mile Overseas Highway offering stunning ocean scenery..

VisitFloridaKeys.com/Meeting-Planners

Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa



Courtesy Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa

With emerald waters and white-sand beaches as its backdrop, the Gulf-front Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa combines scale, service, and setting into an unforgettable experience. The resort features nearly 62,500 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor space, including three ballrooms, and a seasoned events staff streamlines the planning process so planners can focus on the attendee experience. Groups can enjoy championship golf, rejuvenating spa amenities, and five distinctive dining venues, including the resort’s AAA Four Diamond steakhouse.

HiltonSandestinBeach.com/Florida-Meetings



Courtesy WEC

World Equestrian Center – Ocala



Located in central Florida, World Equestrian Center – Ocala blends world-class infrastructure with refined hospitality. The expansive property features two state-of-the-art, column-free expo centers, versatile convention and meeting space, beautifully designed outdoor venues suitable for events of every scale, and five distinctive accommodation options. Its newest hotel, The Equestrian Manor includes multiple ballrooms, thoughtfully designed breakout rooms, and four restaurants. Guests can unwind at the spa, enjoy nearby championship golf, or experience the vibrant calendar of events hosted throughout the property.

MeetAtWEC.com

Visit Jacksonville



The “Flip Side of Florida,” Jacksonville features a vibrant riverfront downtown, major full-service hotels, and 22 miles of uncrowded white-sand beaches. Planners can choose from dozens of event venues to accommodate groups of 10 to 10,000, including the historic Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center, featuring 78,500 square feet of exhibit space. The convention center is just minutes from Jacksonville International Airport (JAX) and less than one mile from more than 2,300 hotel rooms. Groups can enjoy world-class museums, fresh seafood from local restaurants, and endless outdoor activities.

VisitJacksonville.com/Meetings

Courtesy © Disney

Disney Meetings & Events



Disney Meetings & Events unlocks endless possibilities for planners to create transformational experiences across Walt Disney World’s five convention destinations—Disney’s Coronado Springs Resort, Disney’s Yacht & Beach Club Resorts, Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa, Disney’s Boardwalk Inn, and Disney’s Contemporary Resort—and immersive theme park environments. Leveraging the expert talent and vast entertainment, décor, catering, and multimedia resources of the Disney Creative Studio, Disney Event Architects collaborate closely with planners to turn every moment into real magic.

DisneyMeetingsAndEvents.com/DisneyWorld

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin



Located in the heart of the Walt Disney World® Resort, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is undergoing a \$275 million transformation, adding 100,000 square feet of new event space while also bringing modern design and enhanced technology to existing meeting spaces. The resort offers 2,600+ guest rooms and suites, 23 restaurants and lounges, pool and spa amenities, and walkable access to EPCOT® and Disney’s Hollywood Studios. In addition, an award-winning conference and convention services team helps planners bring business and Disney magic together.

SwanDolphinMeetings.com

Courtesy Visit Jacksonville

Courtesy The Walt Disney World Swan



Courtesy Rosen Centre

Rosen Centre



Situated in the heart of Orlando's Convention District, the independently owned Rosen Centre offers a decidedly different event experience. The hotel boasts 1,334 ultra-modern guest rooms and suites, 162,000 square feet of flexible indoor/outdoor meeting space, a full-service luxury spa and fitness center, and nine restaurants and lounges, and connects via skybridge to Orange County Convention Center. Plus, the hotel's International Drive location puts attendees at the center of Orlando's exceptional dining, boutique shopping, and world-famous attractions.

RosenCentre.com

The Palm Beaches



America's First Resort Destination®, The Palm Beaches spans 39 distinctive cities and towns along 47 miles of Atlantic coastline in south Florida. The destination offers nearly 20,000 guest rooms and more than 1 million square feet of meeting space, including 350,000 square feet of flexible space at Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach and more than 35,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space at the connecting 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach. Groups can choose from many inspiring Between-the-Sessions experiences showcasing unique offerings available only in The Palm Beaches.

ThePalmBeaches.com/Meetings

Courtesy Discover The Palm Beaches

Courtesy St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB

St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB



On Florida's Historic Coast, meetings are anything but ordinary. St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches offers a wide range of meeting hotels, group accommodations, flexible event venues, and unique historic spaces, all supported by a team of event professionals and modern technology. The region's 42 miles of scenic Atlantic coastline, world-renowned golf, and amazing cuisine provide endless opportunities for attendees to connect with one another and return refreshed and inspired.

MyFloridaMeetings.com

The Jessie



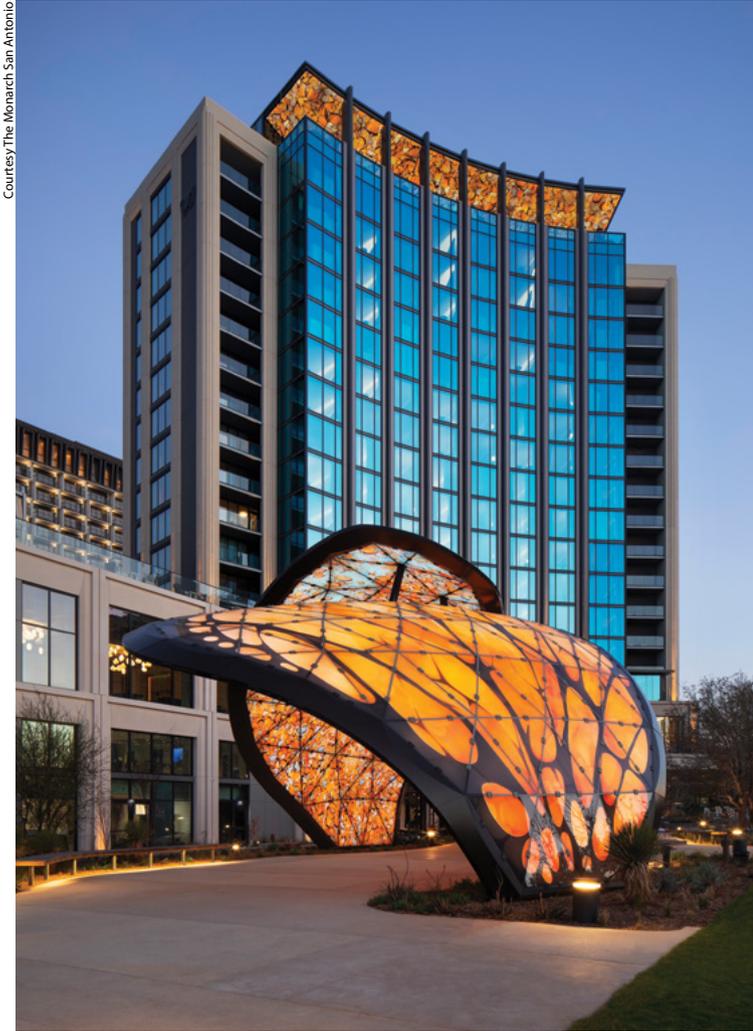
Considered one of Jacksonville's architectural jewels, The Jessie brings event visions to life. The venue offers multiple spaces with flexible options, modern amenities, and professional event production capabilities. Planners can choose from 15 unique event spaces, including the Great Hall, a mid-century modern gem with high ceilings and a capacity of 300 guests. Onsite amenities include a catering kitchen and a full media production studio. Located in the heart of downtown Jacksonville, The Jessie is within walking distance of hotels, restaurants, and the city's exciting riverfront.

TheJessie.org

Courtesy The Jessie

The Monarch Sets New Luxury Standard in San Antonio

By Helen Jacob



Courtesy The Monarch San Antonio

San Antonio is celebrating a new era of hospitality with the debut of The Monarch San Antonio, Curio Collection by Hilton, a \$185 million luxury hotel rising 17 stories above the city's reimaged Hemisfair District. The hotel opened in March after 10 years under construction.

Owned and operated by San Antonio-based Zachry Hospitality, The Monarch stands on the historic grounds where H.B. Zachry helped shape the 1968 World's Fair, continuing a family legacy deeply woven into the city's development.

Steps from the River Walk and the Alamo, The Monarch blends contemporary architecture with natural materials and regionally inspired art, drawing design inspiration from the monarch butterflies that migrate through the region each year. Architecture was led by Overland Partners, with interiors by The Gettys Group and KBAA. Design elements throughout the property reflect the stages of a butterfly's metamorphosis, reinforcing themes of renewal and transformation. Limestone textures, sculptural forms, and sunlit interiors create a sanctuary of calm in the heart of downtown.

The hotel features 200 guest rooms, including 28 suites averaging more than 600 square feet. Select accommodations offer park views and balconies, while a dedicated wellness floor provides fitness-focused amenities.

The property also has multiple dining options, led by executive chef Jae H. Lee, who brings more than two decades of experience shaped by classical training and a global perspective, with culinary influences rooted in French, Italian, Korean, and Mexican cuisines.

"Each restaurant has its own identity, but they're connected by a shared foundation," says Lee. "Technique, consistency, and respect for the fundamentals and the ingredients are what allow creativity to happen. This program is about creating places people want to return to—whether they're staying at the hotel or live down the street. I'm inspired by San Antonio, especially at a moment when the city's culinary scene is earning national attention. It's where deep-rooted traditions, ambitious chefs, and a growing appreciation for global technique are shaping one of the most dynamic food cultures in Texas."

Oak & Amber, the signature restaurant, highlights wood-fired cuisine rooted in Texas ranching and Gulf Coast flavors. Aleto rooftop restaurant and bar pairs Yucatán-inspired dishes with skyline views and mezcal-forward cocktails. The Nectarie Café offers French-inspired fare in a light-filled setting that transitions from daytime café to an evening wine and charcuterie destination.

Wellness offerings include a spa with botanical therapies, hydrothermal experiences, infrared sauna sessions, and cold plunges, complemented by a third-floor outdoor pool deck and fitness studio.

Anchoring the property at street level is La Mariposa, a \$2 million sculptural pavilion created in collaboration with local artists and San Antonio-based Overland Partners. Designed as a tribute to transformation and migration, the three-winged structure features stained glass and integrated LED lighting that glows across the district at night, creating what developers hope will become a new downtown landmark.

For planners, The Monarch offers more than 15,000 square feet of meeting and event space, all situated on a single floor with natural light in every room. Highlights include the 5,000-square-foot Meridian Ballroom, along with Solana, Maverick, Ember, and Zephyr meeting spaces, all equipped with modern conference technology.

"The Monarch San Antonio marks a significant step forward for the city, signaling that San Antonio is ready to host sophisticated, high-end meetings and events that planners may not have previously considered," says Rick Slutter, managing director of Zachry Hospitality. "By introducing a new luxury standard to the market, we're not only enhancing the guest experience and elevating the destination's overall profile but also strengthening San Antonio's ability to compete for premier groups that expect refined environments, exceptional service, and a strong sense of place."

Located approximately 15 minutes from San Antonio International Airport (SAT), The Monarch offers a combination of luxury accommodations, chef-driven dining, and thoughtfully designed meeting spaces. 🍷

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