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ConventionSouth

The national planners' resource for Southern destinations

BOUTIQUE HOTELS

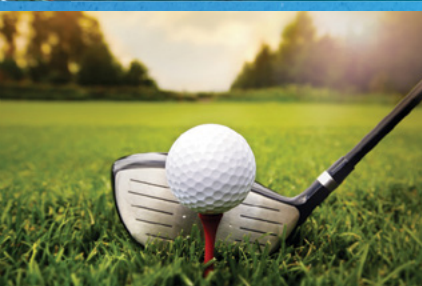
Add a Sense of Place
& Purpose to Events

HOT THINGS TO DO IN THE SOUTH
Fun & Adventure for Any Agenda

Plus: Top Trends in Incentive Travel

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putting it in perspective

Hotspots, Hidden Gems & Boutique Spaces

All across the South, one-of-a-kind attractions and activities offer meeting attendees the opportunity to experience what makes each destination unique. Tours and teambuilding options go beyond just passing the time and building camaraderie; they bring a deeper connection to the host city and its community, culture, and history. From historical attractions and world-class museums to thrilling adventures and family fun, the South's many can't-miss attractions add excitement to any event agenda. "What separates us is that we're still a family-run business," says Anthony Brutto, general manager of Loretta Lynn's Ranch in Hurricane Mills, Tenn. "My grandmother wants everybody who comes to the ranch to feel like they're part of the family. We're trying to always change and evolve...and invite guests to come and enjoy the property." Discover how the hotspots and hidden gems in "Hot Things to Do in the South," on page 6, can add fun, adventure, and cultural enrichment to your next meeting.

Our cover story spotlights some of the region's standout boutique hotels, bringing a strong sense of place and purpose to meetings and events. With thoughtfully designed spaces, personalized service, locally inspired cuisine, and curated experiences, these boutique properties encourage networking, collaboration, customization, and engagement. See how The Pearl Hotel in Rosemary Beach, Fla., the AAA Four Diamond property featured on the cover, and our other boutique selections deliver both big impact and inspired intimacy for a distinct event experience. Our spotlight on boutique hotels begins on page 12.

On page 17, "Rewarding Experiences" explores the latest trends in incentive travel. While incentive programs are among companies' most costly events—averaging \$6,000 per person—they are also among their most valuable in terms of ROI. In fact, 99% of executives support reward and recognition programs, and their investments are paying off. Among qualifiers who attended their incentive trip, 89% said they are more likely to stay in their job, 89% feel stronger loyalty to the sponsoring company, and 93% are eager to win again. Learn more about the trends shaping incentive travel—from shrinking budgets and changing market conditions to multigenerational appeal and ever-increasing expectations—and how planners are delivering exciting incentive programs for companies and attendees alike.

This issue also includes our Events Planners' Guides to Louisiana (page 23) and Tennessee (page 32). Check out each destination's new hotels, venues, and attractions for successful and memorable meetings.

Voting for *ConventionSouth's* annual Readers' Choice Awards is now open. This is your chance to recognize your favorite venues and destinations throughout the South. After receiving hundreds of nominations, we've narrowed the list to only the industry's best across several categories, including convention and visitors bureaus, hotels, convention and conference centers, unique event venues, and new and renovated sites. Visit ConventionSouth.com to cast your votes in *ConventionSouth's* 2026 Readers' Choice Awards. Winners will be announced in our December issue!



Making Meetings Matter More,

Michelle

Michelle Martin
Editor-in-Chief



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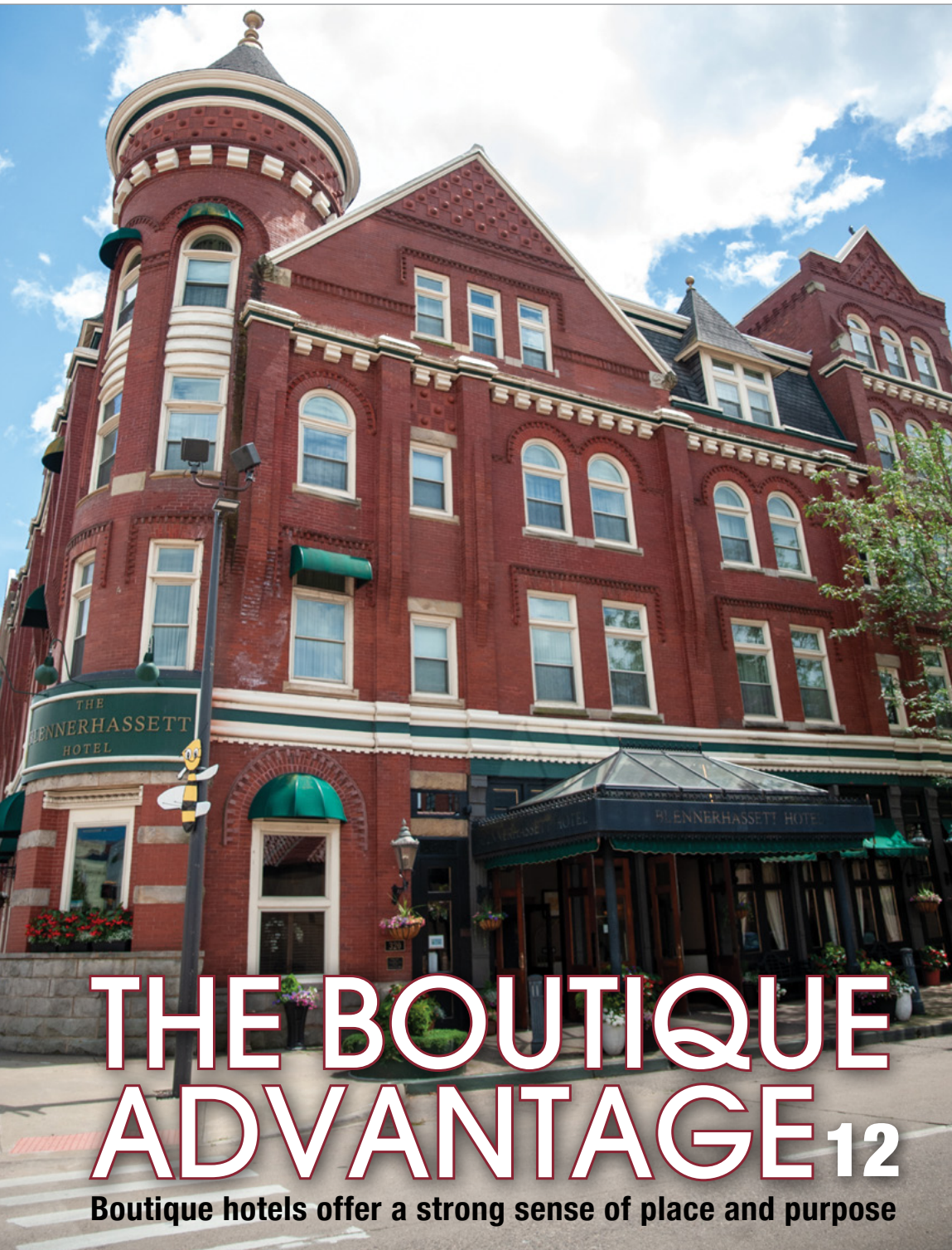
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THE BOUTIQUE ADVANTAGE¹²

Boutique hotels offer a strong sense of place and purpose

Courtesy Blennerhassett Hotel



Courtesy Arkansas Tourism

6

Hot Things to Do in the South

Fun and adventure for any agenda



Courtesy Grande Lakes Orlando

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Rewarding Experiences

Top trends in incentive travel



Jordan Hefler/Courtesy Visit Baton Rouge

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LOUISIANA



Courtesy Visit Kingsport

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TENNESSEE

IN EVERY ISSUE TALKING POINTS 5 CLOSING REMARKS 42

On the cover: The Pearl Hotel in Rosemary Beach, Fla., offers a boutique advantage for meetings and events. Courtesy The Pearl Hotel

The Pulse of Incentive Travel

A conversation with Annette Gregg of SITE

Courtesy SITE



SITE (Society for Incentive Travel Excellence) is the only international business events association dedicated exclusively to incentive travel, with more than 3,600 members across 90 countries. CEO Annette Gregg serves both SITE and the SITE Foundation, leading the organization's global strategy and working closely with boards, staff, chapters, and members to advocate the

business case for incentive travel. Here, Gregg shares how SITE's research, expertise, and international community support the incentive travel market and deliver practical value for incentive professionals—and reveals the trends shaping U.S. incentive travel.

How does SITE assist event professionals with incentive travel planning?

Our members include corporate buyers, incentive agencies, destinations, DMCs, hotels, and other specialist partners. SITE supports event professionals at every stage of their careers through practical education, professional certification, industry events, and access to a global community of incentive travel experts. SITE's Learn Hub, webinars, events, and qualifications also help professionals develop their knowledge in such areas as program design, budgeting, risk management, sustainability, and participant experience.

Research is another important part of our support. Studies, such as the Incentive Travel Index and our Pulse inSITEs, help planners understand changing expectations and market conditions. We turn those insights into practical guidance to help professionals create incentive programs that motivate participants and deliver measurable value to their organizations.

What are the most important factors currently influencing U.S. incentive trips?

Geopolitical sensitivity is having a greater impact than general industry conversation might suggest. Among U.S. respondents, only 4.4% say their booking behavior has not been materially affected by geopolitical sentiment in the past 12 months.

Among the remainder, 16% have removed a destination from a shortlist, 16% have conducted additional risk assessments, 9% have relocated a confirmed program, and 8% have substituted a domestic or regional program for an international one.

How have trends in U.S. incentive trips changed the most in recent years?

One of the most striking findings is that the vast majority of U.S. respondents say they are increasing their use of new destinations. Resort and all-inclusive resort destinations are both rising, while urban destinations continue to fall. Domestic and shorter-distance programs are also trending upward.

Trends for the U.S. as a destination remain positive, with 75% of respondents planning to use U.S. destinations either the same frequency or more than in previous years.

Program formats are also changing. Nearly 50% of U.S. respondents agree that shorter, more intense experiences are the future.

How are planners balancing clients' budgets with attendees' expectations for exclusive, luxurious incentive experiences?

Recent data suggests planners are maintaining program quality rather than making significant upgrades. They are meeting expectations in how they design the program, rather than simply increasing the overall budget.

Average per-person spend by program type among U.S. respondents is a median of \$8,000 for Presidents Club/highest-tier programs and \$4,700 for broad participation programs.

Looking at budget strategy, more than 50% of U.S. respondents say they are matching inflation—spending more per person but delivering a similar program—while 28% are trimming programs, and only 16% are actively improving programs. That balance changes somewhat by 2028, when 24% plan to improve their programs. This suggests upgrades may be delayed rather than abandoned altogether.

The budget breakdown also helps explain the pressure planners face. Hotels and airfare consume 46% of the average program dollar, while experiences and activities account for only 10%. As a result, planners are maintaining quality at the hotel and air level while keeping experiential spending under tighter control. Free time, cited as the most important activity by 68.3% of U.S. respondents, and cultural or sightseeing experiences, cited by 65.2%, often can be delivered at a lower marginal cost than highly structured luxury events. That could explain how planners are maintaining the perceived value of programs without proportionate budget increases.

How are multigenerational preferences impacting U.S. incentive trips and trends?

The most important finding is that incentive travel remains highly motivating across every working generation. In SITE and Maritz's study of U.S. employees, 61% described individual travel as "extremely motivating," while group travel ranked second-highest, at 50%. Both outperformed cash and the other reward types.

The differences are less about whether each generation values travel and more about what makes the experience work for them. Gen Z (13%) dislikes group travel or traveling with colleagues, compared with 6% of Millennials and 7% of Gen X.

This does not mean creating a separate trip for every generation. It means designing one experience with enough choice, flexibility, and meaningful recognition to connect with a multigenerational workforce. 🌟

**Statistics are based on publicly available data, internal SITE research Pulse surveys, and joint projects with Maritz, IRF, and MPI.*



HOT THINGS TO DO IN THE SOUTH

Offsite tours and teambuilding bring fun and adventure to any agenda

By Keith Loria

Today's attendees expect more from a meeting destination than comfortable hotels and well-equipped convention centers. They want opportunities to experience the places they're visiting—whether that's paddling a scenic river, touring a world-class museum, sampling regional cuisine, or exploring one-of-a-kind attractions not found anywhere else.

Incorporating local experiences into an agenda does more than fill free time. Offsite excursions and pre- and post-conference activities offer opportunities for more relaxed networking and teambuilding while also helping attendees connect with the host city and region. Such experiences also encourage guests to explore attractions they might otherwise overlook, extend their stay, or return with family.

Throughout the South, destinations are embracing these trends by creating fun activities and unforgettable experiences designed to leave a lasting impression on attendees. Whether planners are seeking outdoor adventure, cultural enrichment, culinary delights, or family fun, these can't-miss attractions offer planners distinctive ways to showcase the South's rich character, warm hospitality, and unique sense of place.

NATURE

Buffalo National River, Arkansas

For meeting planners looking to add outdoor adventure to an itinerary, the Buffalo National River delivers everything from peaceful floats to more challenging paddling excursions amid some of the South's most spectacular scenery. The nation's first designated National River winds 135 miles through the Ozark Mountains, making it easy for groups to tailor an experience to attendees' individual skill levels.

"The Buffalo invites both travelers and locals to explore its natural beauty—from prehistoric and historic sites to abundant wildlife and immersive outdoor experiences," says Faith Carr, public relations and sales manager for the Arkansas Dept. of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. "The area is also a designated International Dark Sky Park."

Carr notes the river's three districts provide options for virtually all visitors. Experienced paddlers often gravitate toward the Upper District's Class I and II rapids, while the Middle and Lower districts offer gentler floats ideal for beginners, families, and groups. Outfitters provide rentals, guides, shuttle service, and lodging, simplifying logistics for meeting planners.

"We've seen a steady rise in visitor numbers as interest in outdoor recreation continues to grow," Carr says. "Our outfitters have begun offering more tailored experiences specifically designed for families, groups, and multi-day travelers."

Wild Banker Horses of Shackleford Banks, North Carolina

Few offsite excursions create the kind of lasting impression as a trip to see the Wild Banker Horses roaming freely along North Carolina's Shackleford Banks.

Accessible only by ferry or private boat, the barrier island offers groups an opportunity to experience one of the South's most incredible wildlife encounters while exploring the unspoiled beaches of Cape Lookout National Seashore. Believed to be descendants of Spanish horses arriving centuries ago, the protected herd continues to roam the island much as it has for generations.

Because the island remains largely undeveloped, visitors can pair horse watching with shell collecting, birding, kayaking, or simply

enjoying the quiet beauty of the Crystal Coast. The excursion works particularly well for spouse programs, family members accompanying attendees, or groups looking to add a memorable half-day adventure before or after a conference.

SPORTS, RECREATION & ADVENTURE

Rail Explorers USA, Kentucky

Groups looking for a teambuilding activity that's equal parts recreation and sightseeing will find an unexpected option aboard Rail Explorers USA in Versailles, Ky.

The guided excursions take riders along historic railroad corridors aboard electric-assisted rail bikes, allowing participants to enjoy Kentucky's countryside without requiring athletic ability or cycling experience. Because the bikes are designed for riders of varying ages and abilities, the experience naturally lends itself to corporate outings, reunions, and multigenerational family groups.

Instead of rushing from attraction to attraction, guests can slow down, enjoy the scenery, and learn about local railroad history from guides along the route. The leisurely pace also encourages conversation, making the excursion especially appealing for teambuilding among colleagues and attendees.

For meeting planners seeking something beyond a traditional bus tour or museum visit, Rail Explorers USA offers an active yet accessible way to experience the Bluegrass State.

NASCAR Racing Experience, South Carolina

For planners looking to add high-speed adventure and adrenaline to their agenda, the NASCAR Racing Experience in Darlington (and several other Southern locations) allows attendees to get behind the wheel of an authentic NASCAR stock car, or ride shotgun with a professional driver, on a real speedway.

Following classroom instruction and safety training, participants take multiple laps around the track while experiencing the speed and precision definitive of one of the South's most popular spectator sports. Ride-along options allow less adventurous guests to enjoy the thrill without actually taking the wheel.

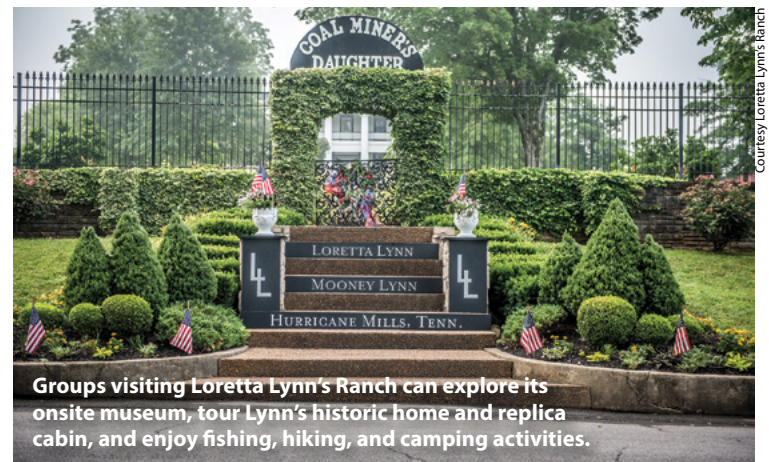
The experience works particularly well for incentive trips, executive outings, and teambuilding events, giving participants an unforgettable story to bring home. For planners seeking an activity that goes beyond the typical offsite excursion, few attractions generate as much excitement as spending the day at the racetrack.

Loretta Lynn's Ranch, Tennessee

Located in Hurricane Mills, Loretta Lynn's Ranch—once the private home of the legendary singer-songwriter—has grown well beyond its country music roots into a destination capable of hosting everything from family vacations to major group events, making it an appealing addition to meeting itineraries in Middle Tennessee.

"What separates us is that we're still a family-run business," says Anthony Brutto, the ranch's general manager and Lynn's grandson. "My grandmother wants everybody who comes to the ranch to feel like they're part of the family."

Visitors can spend hours exploring the 18,000-square-foot museum, touring Loretta Lynn's historic home and a replica of the Kentucky cabin where she grew up, or enjoying outdoor activities, including



Groups visiting Loretta Lynn's Ranch can explore its onsite museum, tour Lynn's historic home and replica cabin, and enjoy fishing, hiking, and camping activities.

Courtesy Loretta Lynn's Ranch



The NASCAR Racing Experience is a great option for adding excitement to incentive trips, executive outings, and teambuilding activities.

Courtesy NASCAR Racing Experience



Horseback riding and authentic ranch activities give visitors a firsthand look at Texas' enduring cowboy culture.

Courtesy King Ranch

fishing, hiking, and camping. Throughout the year, the ranch hosts motocross competitions, horseback events, concerts, Jeep gatherings, and other festivals drawing large crowds.

Brutto says the ranch continually looks for new ways to welcome visitors while preserving Lynn's legacy. "Every year we try to do something new," he says. "We're trying to always change and evolve... and invite guests to come and enjoy the property."

Texas Ranch Experience, Texas

Nothing says Texas quite like a day on a working ranch. Across the state, guest ranches welcome visitors with horseback riding, cattle drives, fishing, chuckwagon meals, and evenings around the campfire—offering attendees an authentic taste of the Lone Star State's ranching

Courtesy Lafayette Travel



The Cajun Food Trail introduces visitors to the authentic flavors and family-owned restaurants that define Louisiana's culinary heritage.

Courtesy High Museum of Art Atlanta



The High Museum of Art Atlanta brings artistic sophistication to private events.

heritage. Many properties also accommodate corporate retreats, reunions, and group outings, making them a natural fit for meetings looking to showcase local culture.

Whether guests spend a few hours learning ranch skills or extend their stay overnight, the experience offers a refreshing change of pace from conference sessions while creating opportunities for networking in a relaxed outdoor setting.

For groups wanting to experience the true spirit of Texas, it's difficult to imagine a more memorable addition to the agenda than time spent on a working ranch.

FOOD, LEISURE & ENTERTAINMENT

Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum, Florida

For meetings in the Florida Keys, the Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum offers attendees a fascinating look at one of America's literary icons while also immersing visitors in the charm of Old Town Key West.

"The Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum offers visitors a rare opportunity to step directly into the environment where one of

America's most celebrated authors lived and worked during some of his most productive years," says Alexa Morgan, director of public relations.

Guests tour Hemingway's writing studio, stroll the tropical grounds, and meet the property's famous six-toed cats while learning about the author's life beyond his books. Morgan says visitors often connect with Hemingway's love of fishing, travel, and entertaining, gaining "a more human understanding of Hemingway beyond the larger-than-life public image."

The museum appeals to literary enthusiasts, history buffs, and first-time visitors alike, making it a natural fit for spouse programs or small-group outings during Key West meetings and events.

High Museum of Art Atlanta, Georgia

Just minutes from Atlanta's convention district, the High Museum of Art offers meeting attendees an opportunity to experience one of the Southeast's premier cultural institutions.

"We've worked hard in recent years to become a profoundly different magnet in the community, welcoming a diverse audience with a rotating lineup of special exhibitions and events," says Marci Tate Davis, senior manager of public relations. "We've made a conscious effort to present exhibitions and programs for all ages and interests."

Current highlights include Amy Sherald: American Sublime, featuring more than 35 works by the acclaimed Georgia artist, along with newly installed American Art galleries and one of the nation's most significant collections of folk and self-taught art. Visitors can also enjoy popular programs, such as High Frequency Fridays and Friday Jazz.

"The High is a beacon for the arts in Atlanta," Davis says. "We're the place where all of Atlanta feels comfortable coming together, and we embrace a sense of Southern hospitality."

The High Museum of Art hosts weddings, corporate events, receptions, lectures, presentations, and other private events. Available spaces include the Wieland Pavilion Grand Lobby (400 standing/250 seated capacity), Robinson Stent Atrium (300 standing/165 seated capacity), Rollins Lobby & Terrace, Orkin Terrace, Margaretta Taylor Lobby, and Hill Auditorium.

Cajun Food Trail, Louisiana

One of the best ways for meeting attendees to experience Louisiana is one bite at a time. The Cajun Food Trail leads visitors through Lafayette and the surrounding Acadiana region, where locally owned restaurants, markets, and specialty shops showcase the bold, unique flavors that have made Cajun cuisine famous around the world.

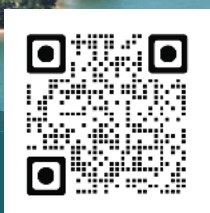
Whether guests are sampling boudin, cracklins, crawfish étouffée, or a steaming bowl of gumbo, the trail introduces them to south Louisiana's culinary traditions and welcoming hospitality. Many stops are family-owned and have served locals for generations, giving visitors an authentic taste of the region beyond simply a tourist experience.

The trail is especially well-suited for dine-arounds, spouse programs, and pre- or post-event excursions, allowing attendees to explore at their own pace or as part of a guided culinary outing. It's an easy way to add local flavor to an agenda while giving visitors a deeper appreciation for the unique Acadiana culture.

Skipjack Tours, Maryland

Few Annapolis experiences showcase the city's maritime heritage better than a cruise aboard the historic *Wilma Lee*.

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Courtesy Washington.org



Folger Shakespeare Library's many galleries, exhibitions, gardens, and other gathering spaces create a remarkable backdrop and unforgettable experience for group functions.

Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

Fresh off a major renovation, the Folger Shakespeare Library has become an even stronger addition to any Washington, D.C., meeting itinerary.

"We wanted visitors to be able to interact with the Folger more in a way that they hadn't been able to before," says Joy Johnson, director of visitor experience.

The expanded museum now welcomes more than 120,000 visitors annually with new galleries, exhibitions, and gathering spaces.

The centerpiece remains the Shakespeare Gallery, where all 82 of the library's treasured First Folios are displayed together for the first time.

"I have had people crying," Johnson says. "People just get very excited."

Visitors can also explore interactive exhibits, the historic Elizabethan-style theater, the Reading Room, and the library's café—making the Folger an engaging stop for attendees, spouses, and cultural excursions before or after conference sessions.

FAMILY FUN

Cathedral Caverns State Park, Alabama

Meeting attendees and their families will find an unforgettable underground adventure at Cathedral Caverns State Park.

"Cathedral Caverns State Park is one of the South's premier cave destinations, offering an underground adventure unlike any other," says Chris Bentley, park superintendent.

Visitors enter through one of the world's largest commercial cave entrances before discovering spectacular formations, including Goliath, one of the world's largest stalagmites, and the Frozen Waterfall.

Bentley says the attraction extends well beyond the cave tour. Visitors also enjoy gem mining, hiking, camping, cabins, and special events throughout the year.

"We hope every visitor leaves with a greater appreciation for the beauty and history of the natural world," he says.

Whether incorporated into a group itinerary or a family day before or after a meeting, Cathedral Caverns offers a memorable way to experience one of Alabama's natural treasures.

NASA Stennis Space Center, Mississippi

Space exploration takes center stage at NASA Stennis Space Center in Pearlington, where the INFINITY Science Center gives visitors a behind-the-scenes look at America's largest rocket engine test facility.

Interactive exhibits, immersive displays, and guided bus tours introduce guests to the science, engineering, and innovation behind NASA's missions while highlighting the center's continuing role in the U.S. space program. Visitors can explore hands-on exhibits, learn about aerospace technology, and see the massive test stands used to prepare engines for future launches.

Located just off Interstate 10, the attraction makes an easy addition to Gulf Coast meeting itineraries and offers a fun, educational outing for attendees traveling with spouses or children.

Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad, West Virginia

A ride aboard the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad combines breathtaking scenery, rich history, and outstanding wildlife viewing into one memorable excursion.

"What makes the experience stand out is the combination of heritage rail travel, immersive storytelling, and direct access to wildlife viewing,"

Courtesy Cathedral Caverns State Park



Cathedral Caverns offers an underground adventure unlike any other.

Courtesy Coast Mississippi



Groups can enjoy a behind-the-scenes look at NASA Stennis Space Center, America's largest rocket engine test facility.

One of the Chesapeake Bay's remaining skipjacks, the restored vessel takes passengers onto the water while guides share stories about oyster harvesting, shipbuilding, the U.S. Naval Academy, and Maryland's capital city history.

"We probably carry more than 4,000 passengers a season," says CEO Susan Thaxton. "The feedback we get is they enjoy learning about the maritime history of Annapolis."

The experience is especially attractive for meetings because private charters are available for corporate events and customized group outings.

"We definitely see that a lot of corporations are doing events in town," Thaxton says, noting the flexibility to tailor cruises for different groups.

says Kimberly Byard, public relations specialist. “Open-air railcars provide excellent opportunities to spot bald eagles soaring above the South Branch of the Potomac River while guides share stories about the region’s history and natural resources.”

Seasonal excursions, including fall-foliage trips and holiday trains, encourage repeat visits, while the relaxed pace appeals to families, photographers, and outdoor enthusiasts alike.

For planners looking to incorporate a scenic outing into a meeting agenda, the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad offers a memorable group experience showcasing one of West Virginia’s most beautiful landscapes.

The impact of local fun and flavors

Whether attendees have an hour between sessions or an extra day to explore with their families, these attractions demonstrate the variety of experiences waiting beyond the meeting room. By incorporating memorable local experiences into the agenda, planners can give attendees something every successful gathering strives for—a genuine connection to the destination long after the meeting has ended. 🍷



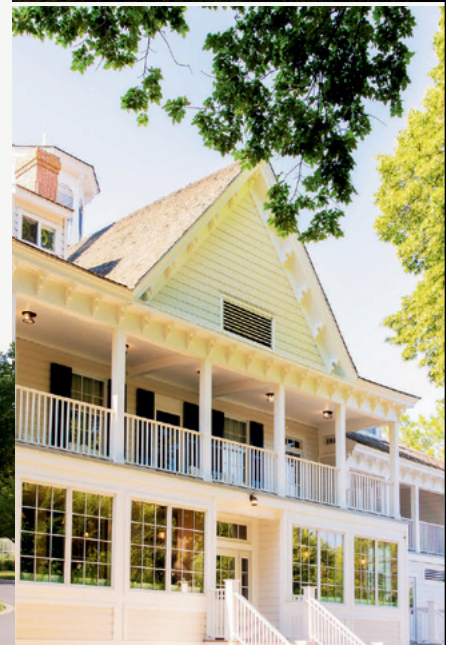
Courtesy Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad

The Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad carries passengers through West Virginia’s scenic Potomac Highlands.



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THE BOUTIQUE ADVANTAGE

Boutique hotels offer a strong sense of place and purpose

By Paige Townley

At a time when attendees increasingly value authentic experiences and meaningful connections, boutique hotels are carving out a unique niche in the meetings industry. While they may not offer the expansive footprint of large convention properties, these distinctive hotels deliver something many groups are seeking: a strong sense of place. From thoughtfully designed meeting spaces and personalized service to locally inspired cuisine and curated experiences, boutique properties encourage networking, collaboration, customization, and engagement—proving that sometimes the most impactful meetings come in smaller packages.

GunRunner Boutique Hotel | Alabama

Housed in a restored 1930s-era building in downtown Florence, GunRunner Boutique Hotel delivers a meeting experience defined as much by atmosphere as by function. Once a car dealership and later a

longtime pawn shop—locally known as “Gunrunner” well before the hotel’s transformation—the property opened in 2017 and has since become a landmark in its own right.

With just 10 individually designed guest rooms, the hotel lends itself to highly curated group experiences. Each guest room carries its own personality, with locally inspired themes that reflect the region’s cultural and musical legacies, including nods to Sam Phillips, Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, and Alabama-based fashion designer Billy Reid.

At the heart of the property is a 3,200-square-foot gathering space built around the original freight elevator and centered on the hotel’s signature craft cocktail bar. Rather than a traditional ballroom, the layout feels more like an elevated living room where conversation and connection take priority. The hotel’s bar program, which features handcrafted cocktails infused with house-grown herbs and elevated, high-end craft cocktails, further enhances group experiences.

Courtesy 21c Museum Hotels

Permanent and rotating art installations bring a creative flair to receptions, networking events, private dinners, breakout sessions, and other meetings and events at 21c Museum Hotel Bentonville.



21c Museum Hotel Bentonville | Arkansas

Set within a historic building that also functions as a contemporary art museum, 21c Museum Hotel Bentonville offers groups a boutique experience where creativity, culture, and functionality intersect in the heart of downtown. The 104-room property sits along the city's pedestrian promenade, placing groups within easy walking distance of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and Bentonville's expanding mix of restaurants, galleries, and cultural attractions.

For meetings and events, the hotel provides more than 12,000 square feet of flexible space designed to feel anything but conventional. The standout Main Gallery, spanning 2,560 square feet, serves as the largest event venue and is surrounded by rotating contemporary art installations. Additional gallery-style spaces throughout the property can be configured for receptions, networking events, private dinners, and breakout sessions, all within an environment that doubles as a curated exhibition. Guests will enjoy spotting the 21c Museum Hotel's green penguin "mascot," created by Italian artist collective Cracking Art, as it roams the property.

The Hive onsite restaurant enhances the experience with catering, private dining options, and regionally inspired cuisine, which can be woven directly into meeting agendas. A dedicated events team works closely with planners to customize every detail, from programming and layouts to unique experiential add-ons.

The Pearl Hotel | Florida

Along Florida's scenic 30A in Rosemary Beach, The Pearl Hotel is a AAA Four Diamond property blending the intimacy of a boutique hotel with the polished hospitality of a luxury resort.

With 55 guest rooms and nearly 3,500 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor event space, The Pearl provides a variety of options for productive meetings and memorable group experiences. Venues range from the intimate Pilar Boardroom, designed for leadership discussions and strategy sessions, to the Pearl Ballroom, which accommodates larger meetings and receptions. The hotel's rooftop venues, including the Havana Beach Rooftop and Rooftop Deck, offer dramatic Gulf views to elevate events, from networking and welcome receptions to private dinners.

Beyond its versatile meeting venues, The Pearl Hotel distinguishes itself through a curated guest experience. Attendees are welcomed with a signature cocktail at check-in and enjoy thoughtful touches throughout their stay, from complimentary valet service to hand-delivered bedtime treats. Between sessions, groups can take advantage of such amenities as Spa Pearl, the rooftop pool, private beach access, and onsite dining at Havana Beach Bar & Grill.

Lawrenceville's first boutique property, The Lawrence Hotel, Tapestry Collection by Hilton offers 120 guest rooms and more than 6,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space.



Courtesy The Lawrence Hotel

The Lawrence Hotel, Tapestry Collection by Hilton | Georgia

One of the newest additions to Georgia's meetings landscape, The Lawrence Hotel, Tapestry Collection by Hilton has brought a fresh boutique experience to downtown Lawrenceville. As the city's first upscale, full-service boutique hotel, the 120-room property merges contemporary design with thoughtful nods to the community's rich history, creating a modern and distinctly local setting.

Designed with gatherings in mind, The Lawrence Hotel features more than 6,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space across 10 flexible venues, each intentionally created to feel welcoming, functional, and adaptable. An open-air courtyard offers an inviting backdrop for outdoor receptions and breaks, while the hotel's signature restaurant, Bellfire—named after Lawrenceville's historic bell tower and firehouse—and Old Nick's—a bar and lounge named after the historic mule that pulled buggies and hauled firefighting gear in Lawrenceville in the early 1900s—provide additional options for private dining, networking events, and after-hours gatherings.

Beyond the hotel, attendees are just steps from downtown Lawrenceville. Located less than a block from the Aurora Theatre and surrounded by restaurants, shops, and cultural attractions, The Lawrence allows groups to easily connect with the destination.

The Manchester | Kentucky

A MICHELIN One Key Hotel, The Manchester in Lexington offers groups the personalized atmosphere and strong sense of place that have become hallmarks of the boutique hotel experience. With 124 guest rooms, the property strikes a balance between providing comfort and intimacy, allowing groups to connect more meaningfully with both the destination and one another.

The hotel pairs thoughtfully designed accommodations with flexible gathering spaces, including Grand Hall, which can host events of up to 300 guests, and the more intimate Fountain Hall for smaller meetings, breakout sessions, and private dinners. Groups can also extend their experience beyond the meeting room at signature venues, such as Granddam dining hall and Lost Palm rooftop bar—ideal for networking receptions, social events, and memorable dining experiences.

The hotel's location in the heart of the Distillery District allows attendees to easily explore local breweries, restaurants, and bourbon experiences between sessions while remaining just minutes from downtown Lexington, Rupp Arena, and Central Bank Center.

Courtesy Maison Métier

A MICHELIN Key luxury hotel, Maison Métier embodies New Orleans charm and Southern hospitality.



Maison Métier | Louisiana

In a city celebrated for its culture, architecture, and hospitality, Maison Métier offers a boutique meetings experience that embodies the spirit of New Orleans. The 67-room luxury hotel—recognized with a MICHELIN Key—provides an intimate setting for executive retreats, board meetings, welcome receptions, and private celebrations. Its thoughtfully curated design, personalized service, and residential-style atmosphere make it an appealing choice for smaller groups seeking a more exclusive alternative to traditional convention hotels.

Rather than expansive ballrooms, Maison Métier features a collection of elegant gathering spaces designed to encourage conversation, collaboration, and meaningful connections. The light-filled Breakfast Room accommodates strategy sessions, executive breakfasts, working lunches, and private dinners, while its signature Salon cocktail bar and restaurant provides a sophisticated backdrop for welcome receptions, networking events, cocktail hours, and cultural programming. Framed by the property's grand staircases, the second-floor landing offers a distinctive setting for intimate receptions and social gatherings, while the private boardroom provides a quiet, refined space for leadership meetings, interviews, and focused presentations. Together, the hotel's venues offer planners the flexibility to create memorable gatherings that reflect the property's boutique character and the undeniable charm of New Orleans.

Hotel Indigo Baltimore Downtown by IHG | Maryland

Set in Baltimore's historic Mount Vernon neighborhood, Hotel Indigo Baltimore Downtown by IHG offers culture and character. Just steps from Baltimore Convention Center, the property places groups within easy reach of the Inner Harbor, Walters Art Museum, Peabody Institute, CFG Bank Arena, and the city's eclectic mix of restaurants, galleries, and live-music venues.

With 162 guest rooms, the hotel provides comfortable group accommodations, with no two rooms exactly alike. Interiors are inspired by Baltimore's literary heritage, with bold design elements, rotating artwork, and subtle storytelling touches reflective of the city's creative energy.

For meetings and events, the hotel offers four flexible spaces designed for gatherings of varying sizes. The Frances Scott Key Room is the largest venue, at 1,232 square feet, while the Edgar Allan Poe Room and James Ryder Randall Room offer additional mid-size and breakout options. A private boardroom accommodates more intimate executive

The Donelson Ballroom at Cotton House, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel features an industrial design with elegant details.



Courtesy VRX Studios

meetings of up to 10 guests, giving planners a range of configurations under one roof.

The onsite Poets Modern Cocktails & Eats provides a convenient all-day dining option with locally inspired menus. A 24-hour fitness center and grab-and-go market add everyday convenience for traveling attendees.

Cotton House, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel | Mississippi

Situated in the heart of downtown Cleveland, Cotton House, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel offers a Mississippi Delta experience inspired by its location on the historic Cotton Row.

The 95-room property provides more than 2,800 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor space across several venues. The Donelson Ballroom is the largest venue, offering 2,496 square feet and a capacity of 250 guests, while The Lawn offers an adjoining outdoor space ideal for receptions, breaks, or standalone gatherings. Smaller groups benefit from the Fairbanks Boardroom, designed for up to 14 attendees.

Beyond its meeting capabilities, the hotel's amenities help round out the group experience. The onsite Staple Food & Drink restaurant offers seasonally inspired, Delta-influenced cuisine, while Bar Fontaine—an energetic rooftop venue with views of downtown—serves as a signature gathering space.

Hotel Vandivort | Missouri

In downtown Springfield, the AAA Four Diamond Hotel Vandivort pairs a restored 1906 landmark with a purpose-built modern addition. Originally constructed as a Masonic Temple and later converted into office space before falling into disuse, the historic structure was revived and reopened as a hotel in 2015. A second building was added in 2019 to meet growing demand, expanding the property to approximately 98 guest rooms.

For meetings and events, the hotel offers a range of flexible spaces designed to accommodate everything from large conferences to intimate gatherings. The historic Vandivort Ballroom is the largest venue, spanning 2,800 square feet, while the newer building's Compass Meeting Hall offers 1,500 square feet of adaptable space. Smaller spaces include the 850-square-foot Cornerstone in the original structure, suitable for smaller meetings and breakout sessions of up to 50 people, and the 250-square-foot V2 Conference Room with built-in presentation features for intimate executive gatherings.

The hotel enhances stays with standout amenities, including The Order, its onsite fine-dining restaurant, and Vantage Rooftop Lounge.

Brandon Barre/Courtesy Grand Bohemian Lodge Asheville



Grand Bohemian Lodge Asheville's 17th-century European hunting lodge design brings a retreat-like ambiance to meetings.

Courtesy The Vendue, Charleston's Art Hotel



Original contemporary artwork throughout The Vendue, Charleston's Art Hotel inspires creativity, conversation, and connections among meeting attendees.

Grand Bohemian Lodge Asheville, Autograph Collection | North Carolina

Drawing inspiration from a 17th-century European hunting lodge, Grand Bohemian Lodge Asheville, Autograph Collection brings an exclusive retreat ambiance to meetings.

Located in Asheville's historic Biltmore Village, the property features 104 guest rooms, while the adjacent 20-room Manor House provides additional group accommodations and more than 5,000 square feet of meeting and event space. The Kessler Ballroom, Bösendorfer Salon, Bavarian Boardroom, and Tyrolean Terrace provide eclectic, character-filled settings for meetings and events of all types. Groups can also enjoy private dining experiences at Red Stag Grill or choose the Manor House's dedicated meeting room for smaller gatherings.

One of the property's greatest advantages is its flexibility. The Grand Bohemian Lodge team works closely with planners to create customized experiences tailored to each group's objectives, whether that means arranging unique culinary offerings, designing specialized event programming, or coordinating a full-property buyout for an exclusive retreat atmosphere.

Ambassador Hotel Tulsa, Autograph Collection | Oklahoma

Housed in a restored 1929 landmark and listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, the Ambassador Hotel Tulsa, Autograph Collection blends historic character and modern hospitality in downtown Tulsa. With just 55 guest rooms, the property offers an intimate setting where groups benefit from focused attention, streamlined planning, and an atmosphere that encourages connection.

The hotel's collection of meeting and event spaces is tailored for a range of group needs, from executive gatherings and strategy sessions to private celebrations and incentive programs. The Provence Meeting Room provides an ideal setting for board-level discussions, while the Tuscany Room adapts easily to presentations, receptions, and group functions. For smaller gatherings and informal networking, The Library offers a warm, residential feel, and the property's signature Wine Cellar is one of Tulsa's most distinctive event venues, ideal for private dinners, tastings, and memorable receptions.

Culinary experiences play a central role in the hotel's appeal. Chalkboard Kitchen + Bar, a longtime Tulsa favorite, offers chef-driven menus and customized dining options for groups, ranging from plated dinners and cocktail receptions to private brunches highlighting regional flavors and hospitality.

The Vendue, Charleston's Art Hotel | South Carolina

Tucked in Charleston's historic French Quarter, The Vendue, Charleston's Art Hotel delivers impactful experiences without sacrificing personality. Housed in two interconnected historic buildings dating back to the late 1700s, The Vendue (along with The Enclave) offers a distinctive setting with original contemporary artwork displayed throughout—creating conversation starters and inspiring fresh perspectives.

The Vendue is intentionally designed for small to mid-sized groups. Its standout meeting venue, The Gallery, offers an alternative to traditional hotel conference rooms. Filled with character and surrounded by curated artwork, the flexible space accommodates everything from board meetings and strategy sessions to cocktail receptions, private dinners, and customized gathering lounges.

When the workday ends, attendees can gather for a curated meal at Revival or enjoy networking receptions and celebrations at The Rooftop, where views of Charleston Harbor and the city skyline provide an unforgettable backdrop.

The Chloe Nashville | Tennessee

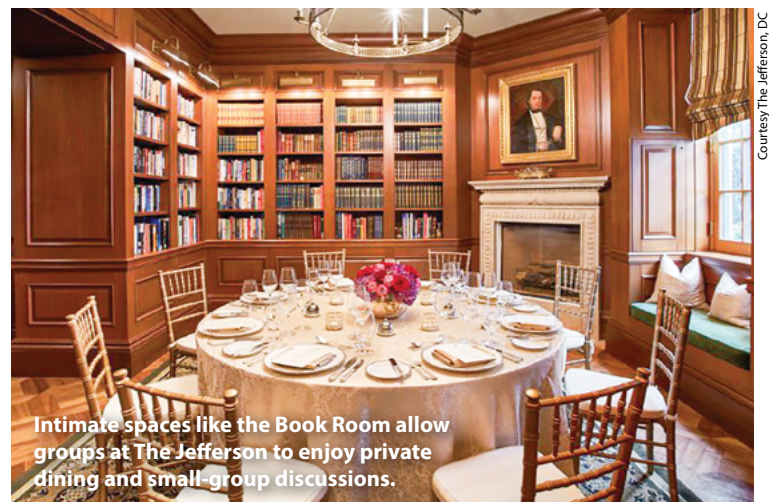
For groups seeking an environment that feels more like a private residence than a traditional hotel, The Chloe Nashville offers an option in the heart of Nashville's Hillsboro Village. Set within two restored 1920s Craftsman cottages once housing Asylum Records and Spirit Music, the 19-room boutique property blends Nashville's creative heritage with personalized hospitality, creating an atmosphere well-suited for executive retreats, board meetings, and small-group gatherings.

The hotel's smaller scale allows groups to enjoy a highly customized experience, while its event spaces offer comfortable settings that feel worlds away from traditional conference rooms. The Parlor, Private Dining Room, and adjoining sunroom offer flexible space for meetings, private dinners, brainstorming sessions, and social events.

A sense of authenticity extends throughout the guest quarters. Each room features its own design, with details ranging from vintage fireplaces and soaking tubs to private balconies and garden views. Complimentary welcome cocktails and daily breakfast service add a personal touch, while partnerships with local institutions, such as Grimey's Record Shop and the historic Belcourt Theatre, help connect guests to Hillsboro Village and to Nashville's creative culture.



The Frenchie Boutique Hotel brings a farmhouse chic flair to corporate and wellness retreats, reunions, and other small meetings and events.



Intimate spaces like the Book Room allow groups at The Jefferson to enjoy private dining and small-group discussions.

The Frenchie Boutique Hotel | Texas

For groups seeking a meeting experience more like a private retreat than a traditional hotel stay, The Frenchie Boutique Hotel in Round Top offers the ideal alternative. With just 14 guest rooms, the boutique property specializes in creating highly personalized gatherings where attendees can disconnect from distractions and focus on meaningful connections.

What sets The Frenchie apart is its approach to meetings and events. Rather than relying on conventional conference rooms, the property encourages groups to gather in natural, inviting spaces, from the main house living room and expansive dining table to the poolhouse restaurant, outdoor firepits, and shaded back porch. The Frenchie's farmhouse chic atmosphere fosters conversation, creativity, and collaboration. A pool and hot tub, a pickleball court, customized dining experiences, and thoughtfully designed indoor and outdoor gathering spaces further enhance the experience.

Linden Row Inn | Virginia

Linden Row Inn is a historic option in the heart of downtown Richmond. Comprised of a collection of restored Greek Revival row houses dating to the mid-1800s and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the 70-room boutique property delivers an Old World atmosphere while still offering the modern amenities attendees expect.

Its Board Room offers a professional yet welcoming environment for executive gatherings, planning sessions, and small-group discussions, while the secluded Garden Courtyard serves as one of Richmond's most quaint outdoor event venues. Surrounded by lush landscaping and historic architecture, the courtyard is particularly well-suited for receptions, networking events, and private celebrations.

The property's layout encourages connection among attendees while still providing privacy and comfortable accommodations. Seven spacious Parlour Suites feature period architecture, original antiques, chandeliers, 12-foot ceilings, veranda access, and 650 square feet of intimate meeting space for small meetings and breakout functions for up to 25 guests.

The inn's walkable location places guests within easy reach of Richmond's restaurants, cultural attractions, and entertainment venues.

The Jefferson | Washington, D.C.

Set within a restored 1923 Beaux-Arts building in downtown Washington, D.C.—within four blocks of the White House and within easy reach of the city's monuments, museums, embassies, and the 14th Street corridor—The Jefferson brings a quietly sophisticated approach to meetings and events.

The 99-room, two MICHELIN Key hotel offers a collection of intimate, highly tailored meeting spaces. The Gallatin Room is the largest venue at 689 square feet, while the Parlor Boardroom offers a polished setting for smaller meetings. More intimate still, the Book Room and Cabinet Rooms create opportunities for private discussions or small-group sessions.

For a unique dining opportunity, groups can take advantage of The Private Wine Cellar, inspired by Thomas Jefferson's passion for wine; it houses more than 1,300 labels of fine vintages and seats 20 guests. Onsite dining further elevates the group experience. The Greenhouse offers all-day dining beneath a historic skylight, while Quill, an acclaimed cocktail bar featuring live piano, provides an upscale setting for evening receptions.

Enhancing the experience even further, The Jefferson offers a private historian for curated city tours, allowing groups to engage with Washington, D.C.'s history in a way few properties can provide.

The Blennerhassett Hotel & Spa | West Virginia

The Blennerhassett Hotel & Spa boasts history and luxury in the heart of downtown Parkersburg. More than a century of history and hospitality come together in this Victorian-era hotel, built in 1889 during the region's oil and gas boom and meticulously restored for modern use.

With 82 guest rooms, the property offers an intimate setting where attendees can stay, meet, and gather under one roof. The Blennerhassett houses multiple function rooms, from the Charleston Ballroom—the largest event space on property—to the Alexander Parker room, Stratford and Monroe event rooms, and the outdoor Patio Tent, all of which can be configured to tailor each group's individual layout needs.

Amenities add to the experience, including an onsite restaurant, a lounge, and a spa. Its downtown location places guests within walking distance of local attractions, museums, riverfront parks, and the Blennerhassett Island Historical State Park ferry, bringing an easy layer of exploration to any itinerary. 🍷

Rewarding Experiences

Trends in incentive programs reveal how planners are adapting to shrinking budgets and changing preferences



Courtesy Grande Lakes Orlando

By Matt Swenson

Of all the events corporations produce, incentive programs are among the most valuable—and most costly. As exclusive opportunities for companies' top performers and longtime employees, incentives are naturally more expensive than typical ballroom meetings. Yet, despite rising fuel, F&B, and audiovisual costs, corporate leadership almost universally agrees the show must go on.

According to the Incentive Research Foundation's (IRF) *2026 Trends Report*, 99% of executives support reward and recognition programs. Lavish incentive trips often benefit businesses as much as attendees, IRF found, with 64% of top-performing companies rating executive support as "excellent."

"They are moving forward with incentive programs because of the ROI that they get," says Taylor Fain, sales advisor for Sutton Planning, which plans incentives for its software, HVAC, and media clients.

Generally, the goal of incentive trips to popular destinations, complete with memorable activities, is to improve productivity, increase revenue, and build loyalty. Companies paying for the programs aim to build loyalty among their best employees while pushing their all-stars to new heights year after year. For sales representatives and other team members, incentive programs are top-notch rewards for reaching revenue goals and service milestones.

The high costs of incentives tend to pay off for the companies, according to a 2026 joint study by the Society of Incentive and Travel Excellence (SITE) and Maritz, a third-party agency that produces corporate events and incentive programs. Among qualifiers who attended their trip, 89% said they are more likely to stay in their job, 89% feel stronger loyalty to the sponsoring company, and 93% are eager to win again.

While incentive trips remain a significant investment for corporations—an average spend of \$6,000 per person in North America,

according to the *2025 Incentive Travel Index*—planners face shrinking budgets, changing market conditions, and ever-increasing expectations. Yet, companies and attendees alike expect planners to deliver a certain standard of excellence, despite these factors. Here's a look at current trends shaping incentive programs.

Same perks, fewer attendees

According to the *2025 Incentive Travel Index*, only 31% of North American survey respondents expect to increase per-person spend by 2027, and 17% expect to trim program spending by 2027. The most common ways organizations are trimming incentive program spend per person include reducing gifting (45%), selecting less expensive destinations (42%), and opting for shorter-duration trips (42%).

As incentive budgets remain under pressure, companies are becoming more conservative



One of Grande Lakes Orlando's most distinctive offerings is its falconry experience, which allows guests to enjoy hands-on interaction and flight demonstrations with trained birds of prey.



Explore the waters surrounding The Boca Raton via yachts, boats, and water taxis.



Four Seasons Hotel Austin is a hidden oasis in the heart of downtown Austin.

with incentive spending, says Tonja Taylor, founder of Tonja Taylor Event Solutions, who primarily plans incentive programs in the financial and insurance sectors.

However, diminishing the luxury aspect of an incentive trip undermines its purpose.

The solution for many companies is to invite fewer attendees without sacrificing the quality of F&B, amenities, or excursions. As Taylor says, "Maybe before they had 65 people for a golf or a ski event, but now it's an invitation for 30."

Guests are welcome

While corporations might restructure their incentive reward structures so that they recognize fewer employees than before, they are reluctant to remove allowances for honorees to bring a guest. Fifty percent of incentive winners say group travel is their primary motivator, according to the SITE-Maritz study. "Companies recognize that winners expect to travel with a spouse, partner, friend, or family member," Fain says.

Some incentive programs are becoming more family-friendly, allowing children to come as well, so the trip feels like a vacation, according to Lili Kramer, meetings and events coordinator for ServiceMaster Brands. This is particularly true among generational franchise corporations, like Merry Maid, part of the ServiceMaster Brands portfolio. "Child-friendly experiences may help improve participation rates," she says.

Beyond sales incentives

Despite some misconceptions, incentive programs are for more than top sales representatives. The SITE-Maritz study reveals that 60% of qualifiers work in operations or technology, and fewer than 10% work in sales. Meanwhile, the pool is expanding to include Millennials and Gen Z professionals who are moving into leadership and top-performer roles, Fain says.

The challenge for planners is creating an agenda that appeals to all generations while adapting to younger attendees' preferences. "Your Baby Boomer is going to want a different experience than a Millennial or a Gen Z," Fain says. Multiple excursion options can provide the variety needed, Fain adds.

Age range may also be an important consideration when choosing incentive destinations. "When you know you have a diverse audience of different age ranges, your destination choice is even more important," Fain says.

Site-selection shifts

Finding the right incentive reward is a balancing act. "It all starts with the destination," Fain says, noting the destination choice itself can be a motivational tool for staff.

Planners must also weigh luxury and bucket-list destinations vs. convenience. "A big trend is wanting to do trips that aren't your standard family vacation," Kramer says. In terms of convenience, Taylor says, "You



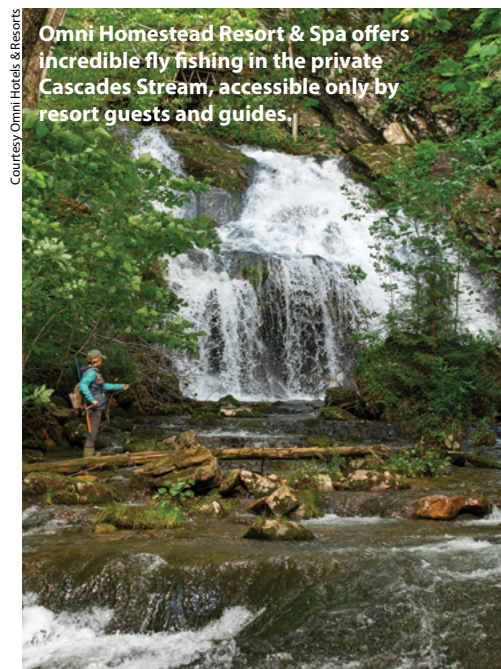
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Omni Homestead Resort & Spa offers incredible fly fishing in the private Cascades Stream, accessible only by resort guests and guides.



Guided kayak tours allow guests of The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa to experience the coastal wetlands' natural beauty.



Today's incentive trips balance curated programming, free time, and group gatherings as part of the complete incentive experience.

want everybody to look forward to it, but also not for it to be a 12-hour journey.”

According to the IRF study, international instability is complicating destination selection, slowing decisions, and increasing the need for thorough risk assessment. Even with careful planning, sudden geopolitical or security disruptions are possible, making it essential to have a Plan B or C, even in destinations with a turnkey approach.

The SITE-Maritz study reveals the majority of incentive travelers lean slightly toward the United States over international destinations (44% vs. 39%). This trend is largely driven by Gen Z, which reported a higher preference for domestic destinations (48%) than older

generations (41-43%). “This may reflect their earlier career stage, cost-of-living pressures, or simply that they have traveled less and find U.S. destinations novel,” the study says.

Several luxury brands with properties in the South often host incentive groups, including the Four Seasons Hotel Austin, Naples Beach Club, A Four Seasons Resort, and Four Seasons at the Surf Club, Surfside, Florida; Marriott International’s Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, Grand Hotel Golf Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection, Grande Lakes Orlando, JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort, The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club, Autograph Collection, and The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa; and

25 Omni Hotels & Resorts properties in Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

Many organizations intentionally rotate the types of incentive destinations, Fain notes. The other planners agree. As Taylor suggests, a group may opt for a ski area one year, followed by a beach destination or a mountain region the next year. Luxury dude ranches are an example of unique settings also available, according to Kramer. “There are so many other opportunities to go to new places that I think people are just starting to think a bit more outside the box,” Kramer says.

With such high expectations and persistent challenges, planners may opt for destinations with more onsite offerings. “I’m seeking a destination that is manageable,” Taylor says, adding that properties with golf, a spa, outdoor recreation, and dining in one location simplify planning.

Enter the tried-and-true resort property, which offers the luxury features attendees want and a predictable budget to help planners—often without leaving the property. Planners can still work with the resort to add curated experiences and fun teambuilding elements, like scavenger hunts, Kramer says.

All-inclusive resorts top the list for all generations of winners in the SITE-Maritz study, reflecting the universal appeal of high-quality (Four- or Five-Star) accommodations for their emphasis on hospitality.

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The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club, Autograph Collection has been a symbol of timeless elegance and modern sophistication in St. Petersburg since 1925.



Guests of Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center can enjoy the 18-hole, par-72 layout at Gaylord Springs Golf Links, a Scottish links-style course bordered by limestone bluffs and federally protected wetlands.

Free time is a must

Flexibility and downtime are critical components of incentive programs. For instance, approximately half of Merry Maids' five-night itinerary is left unscheduled for personal exploration. "They don't want forced fun," Kramer says. "They want to enjoy the trip and not feel like it's work." Unscheduled time allows attendees to explore the destination however they prefer, from shopping and dining to golfing and other fun activities and attractions.

Fain adds, "Our clients want their people to have that free time because they earned it."

Still, most companies prefer planners to create an itinerary for each type of incentive destination, giving guests plenty of downtime while still enjoying some shared group experiences, high notes, and special celebrations. As Fain explains, Sutton Planning's typical incentive schedules focus on three touchpoints: a welcome reception, one group activity, and a farewell dinner or awards celebration.

Group excursions should be limited to approximately three hours, Kramer suggests; otherwise, you have to build in an additional group meal. Fishing, skiing, and golf remain among the most popular group activities, Taylor says.

F&B is adapting

According to a 2025 Gallup poll, only 54% of U.S. adults drink alcohol—the lowest rate recorded in nearly 90 years, based largely on younger generational habits. This trend is becoming part of standard F&B offerings during incentives. "They just choose not to party as much as some of the other groups," Taylor says of Gen Z. "I always add a fun mocktail on the menu for the welcome reception."

Dietary accommodations are increasingly important, Kramer says, with gluten-free and dairy requests rising noticeably. Local F&B experiences are also being integrated into events, adding a true cultural experience to dining, she says.

Adds Taylor, "Event planners have to prioritize menu diversity over one-size-fits-all approaches."

Partnerships, personalization & authenticity are key

Just as incentive trips should feel like a personal reward to attendees, they should reflect the individual destinations to create a unique experience. Strong partner relationships with DMCs, DMOs, and local tech providers are essential.

Sutton Planning partners with the local DMC when selecting gifts that incentive guests will remember, Fain says. "Letting attendees experience the destination is so important."

For a great experience, planners should get a true sense of guests' interests. For instance, planners increasingly are personalizing welcome amenities and tailoring in-room gifts to individual preferences, Taylor says. "You have to know your attendees."

Planners are prioritizing meaningful, locally sourced gifts, according to the IRF study. In many cases, they coordinate with hotel staff in providing high-impact gifts. "Being really intentional about gifts has been one of my bigger initiatives," Kramer says. "Attendees increasingly value meaningful gifts over expensive ones. Printed photos and surprise in-room gifts create emotional connections."

In addition, many organizations are offering gift cards because they offer flexible, practical value during economic uncertainty, the IRF study reveals. Employees enjoy having the freedom to use the gift card as they choose—whether for everyday necessities or small indulgences. The IRF study also reveals that dining gift cards have surpassed online retailer gift cards.

ROI on incentives

According to a 2026 U.S. Travel Association study, incentive attendees return to work more energized and more productive. Incentive trips make employees feel valued and give them the opportunity to create memories, the study adds.

With such results, Fain predicts incentives will remain a vital part of corporations' event portfolio. More stakeholders are closely reviewing budgets before approval, but Fain believes Sutton Planning's clients will continue to give incentives the green light. "Incentive programs are a business tool for a lot of these companies," Fain adds.

Incentives can serve as a form of reunion among companies' recurring winners, Taylor says, helping build teamwork even when groups are scattered across different locations.

The right tone and touches go a long way with incentives, according to Kramer. "You don't want it to feel like just a work trip. It's super important they won this trip, and they want to feel like they're being celebrated." 🌱

With its blend of world-class hosting infrastructure and inimitable cultural charm, Louisiana continues to captivate meeting planners and attendees alike. Offering everything from sleek, state-of-the-art convention centers to intimate, historic boutique retreats, the Bayou State easily handles gatherings of any size. Beyond versatile spaces and thousands of modern hotel rooms, groups are sure to stay deeply engaged with Louisiana's legendary culinary scene, vibrant music, and stunning outdoor landscapes.

EVENT PLANNERS' GUIDE TO

LA

Louisiana

BY NICOLE DUFOUR

Groups can enjoy tours of Louisiana's state capitol building and beautiful grounds.

Jordan Heller/Courtesy Visit Baton Rouge

CENTRAL LOUISIANA

Alexandria/Pineville/ Rapides Parish

Explore[AlexandriaPineville.com](https://alexandriapineville.com); **@APACVB**

Randolph Riverfront Center in downtown Alexandria features 67,000 square feet of event space, including a 32,000-square-foot main ballroom accommodating 2,800 for receptions, 1,800-plus for banquets, or 150 exhibit booths.

An additional 27,000 square feet of event space and 261 guest rooms are available at the connecting Hotel Bentley (capacity 500 theater style) and Holiday Inn Alexandria – Downtown by IHG (capacity 850 theater style).

Ten minutes away, Alexandria Convention Center features 21,000 square feet of function space with a seating capacity of 2,367 theater style, 2,133 for receptions, or 107 exhibit booths. The venue connects to the 141-room Four Points by Sheraton Alexandria, which has four event rooms; its

largest space has a seating capacity of 757 people theater style.

Marksville/Avoyelles Parish

Travel[Avoyelles.com](https://avoyelles.com); **@TravelAvoyelles**

Paragon Casino Resort in Marksville boasts 542 renovated rooms and suites, along with 35,000 square feet of meeting space across 14 function rooms. The 23,200-square-foot Mari Showroom accommodates up to 2,500 people theater style, 1,500 banquet style, or 130 exhibit booths. The largest ballroom, at approximately 8,000 square feet, can seat 700 theater style and 520 banquet style.

Natchitoches/ Natchitoches Parish

Natchitoches.com; **@NatchitochesTourism**

Located in the historic district, Natchitoches Events Center features almost 40,000 square feet of flexible space, accommodating 1,000 attendees theater style in its largest space. The

complex features three modular 1,200-square-foot breakout rooms accommodating up to 100 theater style or, when combined into one 3,600-square-foot room, up to 300 guests.

The 87-room Château Saint Denis Hotel offers 4,000 square feet of ballroom and courtyard space for up to 300 guests, while the 80-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites Natchitoches by IHG features one meeting room for up to 40 people. The 63-room Best Western Natchitoches Inn includes Natchitoches Conference Hall, which seats 120 guests theater style.

METROPOLITAN NEW ORLEANS

Kenner/Jefferson Parish

Visit[Kenner.us](https://kenner.us); **@VisitKenner**

Visit[JeffersonParish.com](https://jeffersonparish.com);

@VisitJeffersonParish

Part of the New Orleans metropolitan area, Jefferson Parish offers affordability, easy airport access, and more than 8,200 guest

rooms. Kenner, the largest incorporated city in the parish, is an important gateway and regional hub for meetings.

“Planners love Kenner’s venues and hotels, along with our connectivity to Interstate 10, Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY), and downtown New Orleans,” says Carolyn Barrett, executive director of Visit Kenner.

Kenner is home to the parish’s largest event venue, Pontchartrain Convention & Civic Center, which boasts 72,000 square feet of flexible space across 10 rooms. The venue’s largest space, a 34,560-square-foot combined exhibit hall, seats up to 3,720 guests theater style, 1,780 banquet style, and 1,500 classroom style.

The 245-room DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel New Orleans Airport offers 13,970 square feet of event space across 10 rooms; its largest space can accommodate 450 for receptions or 400 theater style. The 317-room Hilton New Orleans Airport features more than 17,400 square feet of space, with a capacity of 700 people for receptions or theater style. The 100-room Wyndham New Orleans Airport & Conference Center offers 12,000 square feet of event space, while the 95-room Best Western Kenner has meeting space for small groups of fewer than 60 people.

Across the Mississippi River in Westwego, the John A. Alario Sr. Event Center features three exhibition halls, accommodating nearly 3,000 people theater style in its largest space.

Planners can schedule corporate outings at Kenner’s Coconut Beach Volleyball complex, which has more than 20 sand volleyball courts. In Lafitte, Airboat Adventures leads groups on tours of majestic Louisiana swamps.

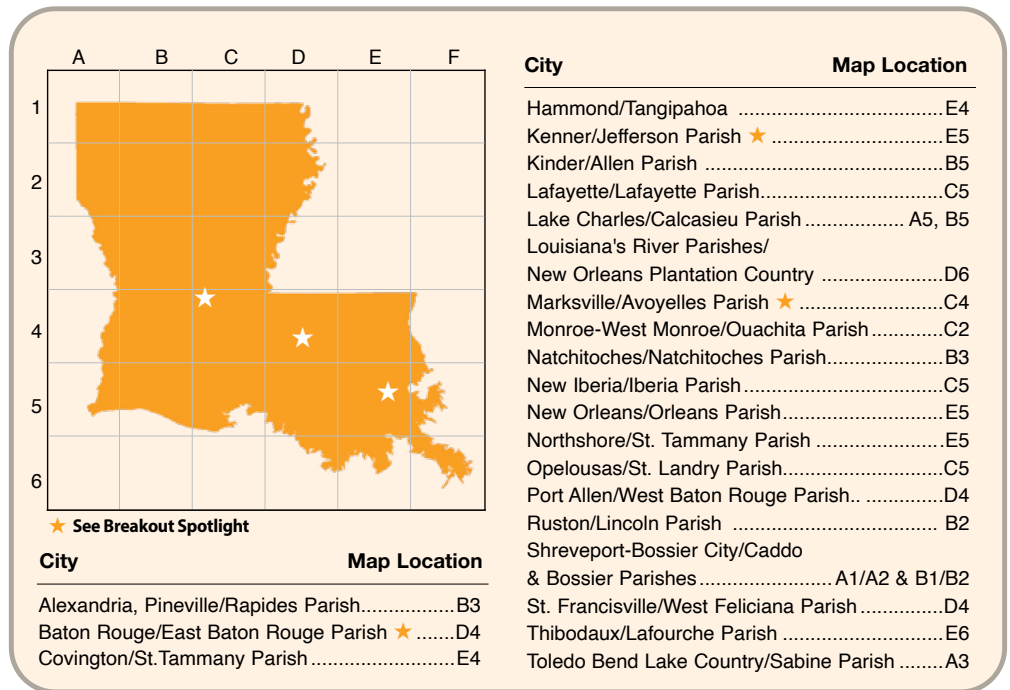
New Orleans/Orleans Parish

NewOrleans.com/meetings;

@NewOrleansAndCo

Planners eyeing the “Big Easy” can leverage more than 26,000 hotel rooms, hundreds of award-winning restaurants, attractions, and one of the nation’s top convention centers within a compact 2.5-square-mile radius downtown.

The updated and modernized LEED Gold-certified New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center—boasting 1.1 million square feet of exhibit space and more than 322,000 square feet of meeting space—continues its extensive \$763 million



Kenner’s 317-room Hilton New Orleans Airport offers convenient access to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport and features more than 17,400 square feet of space.



Courtesy Visit Kenner

transformation. Upcoming phases include construction of a new 1,000-room Omni Convention Center headquarters hotel, which is estimated to open in late 2029/early 2030. The hotel will have approximately 100,000 square feet of meeting space. Sitework and construction have begun at the adjacent 39-acre River District neighborhood, a mixed-use commercial, entertainment, and residential development with a riverfront park.

Wrapping up later this year are multimillion-dollar renovations to the 1,622 guest rooms at Hilton New Orleans Riverside and the 1,333 guest rooms at New Orleans Marriott. New

Orleans Marriott Warehouse Arts District recently updated its 332 rooms, and JW Marriott New Orleans enhanced its 24,000 square feet of meeting space.

“New properties in the boutique hotel space are also adding to the offerings across the city, bringing exceptional F&B offerings, as well as flexible accommodations for smaller groups and meetings,” says Stephanie Turner, senior vice president of convention sales & strategies for New Orleans & Co. “These investments demonstrate our commitment to maintaining a world-class hospitality product for meetings and conventions of every size.”

A 216-room Element by Marriott opened earlier this year, as part of a \$90 million dual-branded adaptive-reuse development downtown. The hotel's companion property, a 250-room Fairmont Hotels & Resorts property featuring 20,000 square feet of event space, is scheduled to open later this year.

Other downtown options include the 1,193-room Hyatt Regency New Orleans, with 200,000 square feet of event space; the 1,100-room Sheraton New Orleans Hotel, with 105,996 square feet of event space; and the 285-room Loews New Orleans Hotel, with 17,000 square feet of space and access to the Piazza D'Italia. In the Warehouse Arts District, across from the National WWII Museum, the 230-room Higgins Hotel & Conference Center, Curio Collection by Hilton accommodates events of up to 650 attendees.

New Orleans continues to earn national and international recognition, including being named a UNESCO Creative City of Music and receiving significant acclaim in the MICHELIN Guide American South. Emeril's restaurant has earned two MICHELIN Stars, while Saint Germain and Zasu each have earned one MICHELIN Star. Other acclaimed dining options include 11 Bib Gourmand and 18 MICHELIN-recommended restaurants.

Louisiana's River Parishes/New Orleans Plantation Country

LARiverParishes.com ; @LARiverParishes

Dr. Rodney R. Lafon Performing Arts Center in Luling features a 1,304-seat proscenium auditorium and a flexible 2,500-square-foot multipurpose space with a capacity of 200 guests. The 30,000-square-foot Edward J. Dufresne Community Center offers meeting space and a 13,900-square-foot gym to host gatherings of up to 1,200 people. St. John the Baptist Parish Community Center in LaPlace has 25,177 square feet of space for up to 1,500 guests. The circa-1780s Destrehan Plantation Meeting Facility includes a 4,585-square-foot restored mule barn and carriage way suited for events of up to 250 guests.

NORTHSHORE

Northshore/St. Tammany Parish

VisitTheNorthshore.com; @LANorthshore

Pelican Park Castine Center in Mandeville boasts an arena with 28,000 square feet of flexible space. Slidell's Harbor Center delivers 18,000 square feet of flexible column-free event space. Maison Lafitte, a restored Victorian estate in Old Mandeville, can host indoor-outdoor events of up to 400 people.

Covington's historic 48-room Southern Hotel accommodates 300 guests in its ballroom, sunroom, and courtyard. Its sister property, The Greenwood/A Southern Hotel Property, accommodates up to 400 people for receptions.

Hammond/Tangipahoa

TangiTourism.com; @TangiTourism

Southeastern Louisiana University's (SLU) student union ballroom accommodates 1,000 for lectures and 700 for banquets. Downtown Hammond's Mezzanine Event Hall accommodates 325, while the restored 1928 Columbia Theatre for the Performing Arts features an 830-seat auditorium.

Tangipahoa Parish has more than 1,600 hotel rooms along I-12 and I-55. The 97-room Holiday Inn Hammond by IHG features 3,000 square feet of space, with a capacity of 130 guests in its largest space. The 95-room Courtyard by Marriott Hammond accommodates up to 60 people, and the 81-room Hampton Inn Hammond can host up to 70 people in its largest configuration.

NORTH LOUISIANA

Monroe-West Monroe/Ouachita Parish

Monroe-WestMonroe.org; @DiscoverMonroeWestMonroe

Monroe Civic Center includes a convention center with six large meeting rooms (350 capacity), a flexible 7,200-seat arena, and a conference hall featuring 14,000 square feet of event space. Across the river, West Monroe Convention Center has 13,000 square feet of exhibit space.

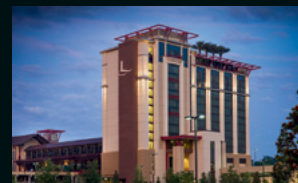
The West Monroe Sports & Events venue features 70,000 square feet of uninterrupted space, seating 2,500 in its largest configuration. This venue is adjacent to several hotels, including the 103-room Residence Inn by Marriott West Monroe and the 92-room Home2 Suites by Hilton West Monroe.

The region offers 2,500 accommodations. The 69-room Hotel Monroe Tapestry Collection by Hilton, which opened last year, includes the Heirloom restaurant and rooftop Star Bar, along with more than 7,400 square feet of space; its largest space is the 4,800-square-foot Opera House Ballroom, featuring 20-foot-high ceilings and Ouachita River views.

Unique venues include downtown's The Loui, a corporate venue with a capacity of 300 guests for cocktail mixers or 180 seated.

Monroe-West Monroe will be adding more than 300 sleeping rooms over the next 15 months, with two hotels already under construction.

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For teambuilding, groups can book The Sheaux live game show studio or explore Ouachita Paddling Trails. The 6,032-square-foot Art Alley-Gator mural is a popular local attraction. “Black Bayou National Wildlife Refuge gives visitors an up-close bayou experience with cypress trees and the occasional alligator sighting,” adds Alana Cooper, president and CEO of Discover Monroe-West Monroe. “We also have an incredible collection of museums, including the Chennault Aviation and Military Museum and The Biedenharn Garden and Coke Museum, which pays homage to Joseph Biedenharn, the first bottler of Coca-Cola in the United States.”

Ruston/Lincoln Parish

RustonLincoln.com; @RustonCVB

Lincoln Parish Library Events Center has 12,415 square feet of space, including the 6,765-square-foot Ruston Room, its largest space. The Club Lounge at Louisiana Tech University’s Davison Athletics Complex accommodates 425 for receptions or 360 for seated dinners. Downtown’s Ruston Civic Center accommodates up to 600 guests in its largest configuration.

Shreveport-Bossier City/Caddo & Bossier Parishes

VisitShreveportBossier.org;

@VisitShreveportBossier

Shreveport Convention Center features 350,000 square feet of versatile space for up to 9,000 guests. The venue connects to the 311-room Hilton Shreveport Convention Center Hotel, which has more than 34,521 square feet of event space across 18 meeting rooms.

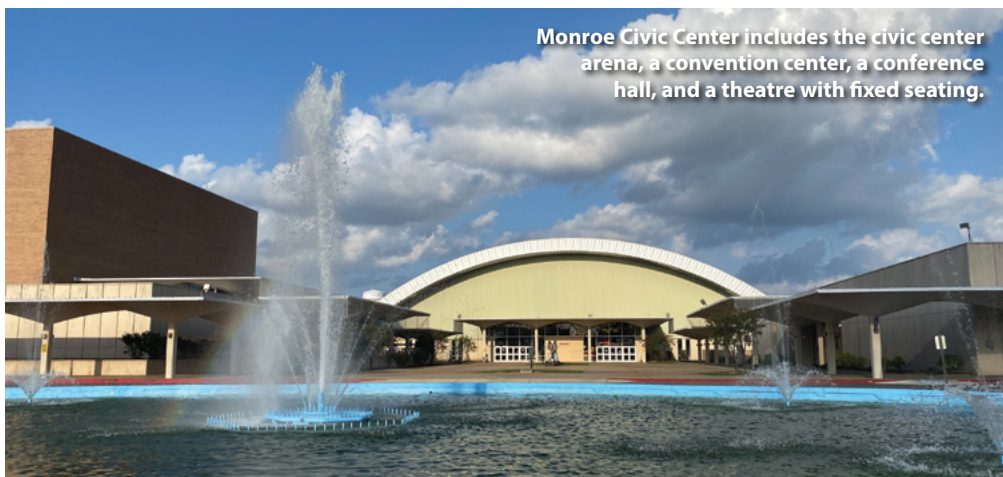
The 270,000-square-foot Brookshire Grocery Arena in Bossier City seats up to 14,000 patrons with a flexible floor, a clubhouse, and 16 luxury suites.

Live! Casino & Hotel Louisiana, a land-based resort with 549 rooms, includes the 25,000-square-foot Live! Event Center, which can accommodate up to 1,170 guests in its largest space. Across the Red River, the 606-room Horseshoe Bossier City has more than 15,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event space, including the 11,522-square-foot Riverdome, which accommodates up to 1,400 people theater style. Other venues include the 395-room Margaritaville Resort Casino, featuring the 7,000-square-foot, 900-capacity Paradise Theater, and the Bossier Civic Center, featuring 31,500 square feet of flexible space.



New Orleans remains a popular meetings destination for its LEED Gold-certified convention center, abundance of hotel rooms, award-winning restaurants, lively entertainment, and one-of-a-kind attractions.

Courtesy New Orleans & Co.



Monroe Civic Center includes the civic center arena, a convention center, a conference hall, and a theatre with fixed seating.

Courtesy Discover Monroe-West Monroe

Shreveport’s 514-room Sam’s Town Casino features 16,398 square feet of event and convention space, with a capacity of 2,500 guests in its largest space. Sam’s Town has entered into a definitive agreement to merge with the adjacent Bally’s Casino, which offers 403 guest rooms and 22,000 square feet of function space. The merger is targeted for completion at the end of this year.

Groups looking for dining options in this corner of north Louisiana won’t leave hungry. “Shreveport-Bossier is a food lover’s paradise,” says David Bradley, vice president of business development for Visit Shreveport-Bossier. “From upscale dining to hidden local gems, our culinary scene is as diverse and authentic as the people who call this region home.”

Groups can sample delicious stuffed shrimp at Orlandeaux’s Cross Lake Café or book private dinners crafted by Chef Hardette

Harris. The Robinson Film Center offers dinner-and-a-movie options at Abby Singer’s Bistro, helmed by Food Network chef Niema DiGrazia.

Shreveport Regional Airport (SHV) has expanded its terminal and will launch nonstop flights to Chicago in October.

SOUTH LOUISIANA

Baton Rouge/East Baton Rouge Parish

VisitBatonRouge.com; @VisitBatonRouge

Louisiana’s dynamic capital city, Baton Rouge is also home to two major university systems, a vibrant downtown, and an array of flexible meeting venues and accommodations.

Raising Cane’s River Center features more than 200,000 square feet of event space, including a 70,000-square-foot column-free

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LOUISIANA
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The Mallory's versatile indoor space can accommodate up to 400 people for banquets or 700 for receptions.



Groups can explore Louisiana's bayou country in Lafayette.

exhibition hall that, combined with an adjacent 10,000-seat arena, provides more than 100,000 square feet of contiguous floor space. Other components include a 26,336-square-foot grand ballroom, 18,800 square feet of flexible meeting rooms, and a 1,900-seat Performing Arts Theatre.

Bally's Baton Rouge Casino and Hotel completed a multimillion-dollar revamp last year. The property features 242 renovated rooms, a land-based casino floor, a DraftKings Sportsbook lounge, bowling lanes, 14,000 square feet of event space, and a 50,000-square-foot atrium accommodating 1,700 attendees for receptions.

The historic Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center will rebrand as a Sports Illustrated Resort. Backed by investors that include Louisiana State University (LSU) great Shaquille O'Neal, the hotel will feature 137 redesigned rooms and 42 luxury condos. The concept preserves the hotel's historic event spaces, including the Riverview Ballroom, which accommodates 300 guests for seated banquets or 500 for receptions. The hotel will remain open during the rebrand renovations.

The 294-room Crowne Plaza Executive Center Baton Rouge features more than 32,000 square feet of space. L'Auberge Casino & Hotel

offers nearly 13,000 square feet of flexible event space, which can be configured into three sections. Renaissance Baton Rouge has 12,685 square feet of space and nine breakout rooms. Baton Rouge Marriott features more than 17,000 square feet of event space.

"Baton Rouge is a welcoming city with beautiful, eclectic neighborhoods; something fun is always going on," says Geraldine Bordelon, senior vice president of destination sales for Visit Baton Rouge.

Downtown has pedestrian walkways along the river, a walkable restaurant scene, and nightlife along 3rd Street. Mid City boasts shopping, art festivals, and local favorites like Elsie's Plate & Pie. Group dining has expanded with downtown's renovated Main Street Market, featuring four restaurants, a coffee shop, and hourly buyouts.

Planners are advised to take note of LSU and Southern University's fall football schedules. Other busy times in downtown Baton Rouge include the annual Blues Festival (April), Louisiana Book Festival (October), and Live After 5.

Port Allen/West Baton Rouge Parish

WestBatonRouge.net; @WestBatonRouge

Positioned across the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge Parish has 1,300 guest rooms and excellent options for small and mid-sized gatherings.

West Baton Rouge Conference Center features 6,799 square feet of versatile event space; its largest space accommodates up to 450 guests theater style or 220 banquet style. Other components include four breakout spaces, each holding up to 50 guests.

Hotels include the 89-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites Port Allen, 86-room Hampton Inn & Suites, and 99-room TownePlace Suites by Marriott. Each of these properties offers meeting space for small gatherings of fewer than 90 people.

St. Francisville/ West Feliciana Parish

VisitStFrancisvilleLA.com;

@VisitStFrancisville

Louisiana's historic Feliciana region is anchored by charming St. Francisville, featuring majestic 18th- and 19th-century homes, unique venues, boutique shopping, excellent dining, and other amenities.

“Groups love meeting here because they can slow down, connect, and experience Louisiana beyond the ordinary,” says April McGhee, executive director of St. Francisville Tourism Commission.

The historic and newly renovated Freyhan Center has four meeting rooms, breakout spaces, exhibit areas, and a 150-seat performance theater ideal for cultural events and corporate retreats. The Mallory offers versatile indoor space for up to 400 banquet guests or 700 for receptions. Hotel Toussaint, a luxury eight-room boutique inn, coordinates directly with The Mallory to provide onsite corporate lodging. Other unique venue options include Jackson Hall, which accommodates banquets of up to 100 guests, and the West Feliciana Parish Library, which accommodates up to 50 people.

St. Francisville Inn offers 11 elegant guest rooms and group access to its MICHELIN-recognized restaurant, The Saint, available for intimate gatherings of up to 40 people. Hotel Francis features 101 guest rooms and 3,682 square feet of dedicated banquet and meeting space across five rooms; its Magnolia Room accommodates up to 158 people.

Groups can hike Tunica Hills, tour Afton Villa Gardens, or visit Audubon State Historic Site, where naturalist John James Audubon lived and painted his 32 Birds of America pieces in 1821. The property’s Oakley House, where Audubon briefly lived, has two meeting spaces for up to 40 people. The Myrtles historic home and gardens features cottage rentals and Restaurant 1796. Other local dining options include The Francis Southern Table & Bar, ideal for private or semi-private group buyouts, Bayou Sara Brewing Co., and Magnolia Café.

Thibodaux/Lafourche Parish

LACajunBayou.com; @LACajunBayou

Thibodaux’s Warren J. Harang Auditorium features a 10,094-square-foot main arena floor and 7,018 square feet of flexible meeting room spaces.

Thibodaux Regional Conference Center has five event spaces, including a 50-seat theater, with a reception capacity of 400 people. Larose Civic Center features four versatile spaces, including an indoor pavilion seating up to 900 theater style or 500 classroom style.

Hotels include the 109-room Hampton Inn & Suites and 85-room Holiday Inn Express by IHG. Both hotels have meeting space for small meetings.

Lafayette/Lafayette Parish

LafayetteTravel.com; @LafayetteTravel

As the “capital” of Louisiana’s Cajun Country, Lafayette offers genuine cultural experiences with excellent venues and accommodations.

“Lafayette’s infrastructure ensures planners get the modern spaces they demand, while our award-winning cuisine, live music, and rich heritage keep groups deeply engaged long after the final session,” says Danielle Tassin, senior sales director for Lafayette Travel.

The CAJUNDOME & Convention Center features a 72,000-square-foot convention center with 37,303 square feet of column-free exhibit space. For large general sessions or entertainment, the adjacent arena seats up to 13,500 people. The nearby University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s (ULL) Student Union accommodates up to 1,100 guests and includes a 250-seat theater.

Lafayette has 5,337 hotel rooms. Hotels include the 327-room DoubleTree by Hilton, which offers 18,124 square feet of flexible event space for up to 1,242 people theater style.

Walkable downtown Lafayette offers vibrant dining and nightlife, while surrounding communities, such as Youngsville and Broussard, provide additional amenities. The Youngsville Sports Complex includes a new amphitheater, multipurpose pavilions, and extensive corporate/festival rental spaces. Broussard features specialized private event venues, such as the newly renovated Madison Banquet Center and the Louisiana Cajun Mansion.

Opelousas/St. Landry Parish

CajunTravel.com@VisitStLandryLA

Planners looking for something different will find it in St. Landry Parish, a heritage destination north of Lafayette, where professional business merges with south Louisiana soul. The parish seat of Opelousas, known as the “Zydeco Capital of the World,” sets a vibrant tone for any meeting.

“St. Landry Parish is where business meetings seamlessly transition into a celebration of Cajun and Creole life,” says Herman Fuselier, executive director of the St. Landry Parish Tourist Commission. “Groups love our modern versatility, outstanding restaurants, music, and heritage properties.”

Evangeline Downs Racetrack & Casino complex offers more than 19,000 square feet of flexible event space across nine meeting and breakout rooms. Its largest space, at 9,520

square feet, can accommodate 600 guests for seated banquets or up to 1,200 seated theater style. Planners can also utilize trackside private club suites or the 816-square-foot Parish Room located in the connected 117-room Evangeline Downs Hotel, Ascend Hotel Collection. The Parlor, a downtown Opelousas landmark built circa 1931, accommodates up to 49 people. Other unique venue options include the rustically elegant La Bellevue Petite Chateau and Sunset’s historic BeauBassin Farm & Gardens.

The new Hotel Klaus, which occupies a circa-1870 general store, brings nine high-end luxury boutique accommodations to the tiny historic town of Washington—featuring more than 700 antique, Civil War, and mid-century vendors within a 20-mile radius. The setting is ideal for executive retreats and antique hunters. Other unique lodging options include the retro motel Train Wreck Inn, in Grand Coteau.

Groups should not miss the monthly Zydeco Capital Jam at the St. Landry Parish Visitors Center, located off Interstate 49.

New Iberia/Iberia Parish

IberiaTravel.com; @Iberia_Travel

Cyr Gates Community Center at New Iberia City Park accommodates up to 1,000 guests theater style. For downtown historic charm, the restored Sliman Theater accommodates up to 300 attendees for receptions, while the circa-1840s cottage and event pavilion at Antique Rose Ville accommodate more than 200 people.

Iberia hotels with event space include the 102-room Hampton Inn & Suites New Iberia Avery Island, which features 3,900 square feet of event space, and 98-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites New Iberia-Avery Island, which accommodates up to 50 people in its largest space.

Morgan City/St. Mary Parish

CajunCoast.com; @CajunCoast

“The Cajun Coast” sits between New Orleans (90 minutes east) and Lafayette (75 minutes northwest) via U.S. Highway 90.

Cypress Bayou Casino Hotel in Charenton has 102 guest rooms and 23,000 square feet of flexible meeting space; its largest space can accommodate up to 2,000 attendees. Morgan City’s Municipal Auditorium features six flexible event spaces, including the Schreier Theater for large group assemblies.



Horseshoe Casino & Hotel in Lake Charles features 252 guest rooms, golf, a lazy river, fine dining, and 3,835 square feet of flexible meeting space.

St. Mary Parish has approximately 1,100 guest rooms across national brands, including the 221-room Clarion Inn & Suites, 83-room Hampton Inn & Suites, and 83-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites. In Franklin, the historic Best Western Forest Inn has 80 guest rooms and event space for up to 400 reception guests or 250 seated.

Planners can coordinate unique offsite networking events at the Mr. Charlie Rig Museum in Morgan City—the world’s only authentic, full-scale offshore drilling rig open to the public. Other unique venues include The Old Building in Berwick (200 capacity) and the historic Arlington Mansion in Franklin (100 capacity). In Patterson, Arcade Brocato is a restored coffee shop overlooking the Atchafalaya River, ideal for private group lunches.

Groups can also explore historic Franklin’s Main Street and enjoy “candle-pouring soirees” at FIFOLET. In Charenton, groups can experience Chitimacha tribal history and split-cane basketry. For wellness, Franklin’s Bayou Bend Health & Fitness Center offers group programming for up to 300 guests.

SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA

Kinder/Allen Parish

AllenParish.com; @ExploreAllenParish

Coushatta Casino Resort in Kinder features 900 luxury guest rooms and suites across three distinct hotel properties: the Grand Hotel, Seven Clans Hotel, and the adult-focused Chalets.

The resort boasts more than 50,000 square feet of event space. Large trade shows utilize a 25,000-square-foot stand-alone event center, an open-concept facility accommodating more

than 100 vendor booths. Coushatta also offers 15 traditional breakout spaces and a 7,193-square-foot grand ballroom seating up to 1,029 guests theater style.

Lake Charles/Calcasieu Parish

VisitLakeCharles.org; @LakeCharlesCVB

Nicknamed “Louisiana’s Playground,” Lake Charles blends professional development with championship golf, live entertainment, and coastal excursions.

“Whether enjoying fresh Gulf seafood or taking in a lakeside sunset, Lake Charles keeps attendees deeply engaged while delivering a sophisticated resort footprint,” says Taylor Beard Stanley, vice president of sales for Visit Lake Charles.

Lake Charles Event Center features 83,260 square feet across eight main areas, including the 7,500-seat Suddeth Memorial Coliseum, the 2,050-seat Rosa Hart Theatre, and an exhibition hall with a capacity of 1,400 trade show attendees.

In Sulfur, West Cal Arena & Event Center features a 17,705-square-foot indoor facility and a 135,000-square-foot covered arena. The indoor exhibit hall seats 1,400 theater style or 560 banquet style and can be divided into three 910-square-foot breakout rooms. The outdoor arena features permanent stadium seating for more than 1,800 people.

Lake Charles offers 7,300 guest rooms. The 1,100-room Golden Nugget Casino Resort features 29,305 square feet across 15 rooms, including the 18,000-square-foot Grand Events Center. The 1,000-room L’Auberge Casino Resort has 26,000 square feet of adaptable space, including 11 flexible rooms anchored by a 14,140-square-foot ballroom. The 252-

room Horseshoe Casino & Hotel features 3,835 square feet of flexible meeting space. Each of these waterfront resorts offers championship golf, a lazy river, and fine dining.

Downtown Lake Charles features new culinary additions like Crying Eagle Lakefront, Augustine, and Coffee:30. For excursions, groups can explore the Creole Nature Trail, enjoy teambuilding at Lake Area Adventures, or discover waterfront aquariums at Port Wonder.

Toledo Bend Lake Country/ Sabine Parish

ToledoBendLakeCountry.com;

#ToledoBendLakeCountry

Besides being home to a 186,000-acre reservoir and top-ranked bass fishing, the Toledo Bend Lake Country in Sabine Parish offers business-ready spaces, supported by a regional inventory of resort guest rooms, private cabins, and state park lodges.

“Toledo Bend Lake Country is a hidden gem,” says Georgia Craven, executive director of the Sabine Parish Tourist Commission. “Groups can immerse themselves in work and play while enjoying some of the most beautiful scenery Louisiana has to offer.”

In 2023, Cypress Bend Resort, a Wyndham Hotel completed a multimillion-dollar transformation, fully updating its 95 guest rooms, dining spaces, lobby, and meeting facilities; and, in 2025, completed a \$6.5 million reconstruction of its championship 18-hole golf course. Cypress Bend offers 11,000 square feet of flexible event space, including the 3,500-square-foot Grand Ballroom, an executive boardroom, an amphitheater, and a pavilion.

Set across 40 acres and under new ownership, Wildwood resort can accommodate up to 200 guests across 31 fully furnished cabins, lodges, and upgraded RV sites. The resort features a new water adventure park and includes the WJ Brown Conference Center, which has an attached, glass-enclosed pavilion with a full commercial kitchen and an adjoining 1,750-square-foot outdoor deck overlooking a landscaped, stocked pond.

Planners can schedule guided group fishing trips with a customized “catch and cook” dining experience. Group options also include North Toledo Bend State Park, which has 10 deluxe log cabins and a group camp accommodating up to 150 people. The park features an indoor meeting room seating 60 people, two outdoor pavilions, and an event pavilion. 🌿



Courtesy Penn Entertainment

L'Auberge Casino Hotel Baton Rouge



For an elevated experience in Baton Rouge, L'Auberge Casino Hotel offers excitement and sophistication. The 12-story AAA Four Diamond hotel features five dining outlets, a rooftop pool, a modern fitness center, and 13,000 square feet of flexible event space. Guests are just steps from the 74,000-square-foot casino's exciting gaming action, with more than 800 slot machines, 50 table games, and The Sportsbook. Dedicated event professionals manage every detail to deliver a seamless experience.

LBatonRouge.com

Jordan Heffer

Visit Baton Rouge



As Louisiana's capital city and the home of two major universities, Baton Rouge offers a lively energy and welcoming atmosphere for meetings and events. Raising Cane's River Center convention complex includes flexible spaces to accommodate conferences, trade shows, galas, or general sessions. A walkable downtown keeps groups connected to nearby hotels, restaurants, and attractions. A dedicated destination sales team works behind the scenes to help planners make their Baton Rouge meetings a seamless, memorable experience, while Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport (BTR) offers easy accessibility.

VisitBatonRouge.com

Visit Kenner



Located in southeast Louisiana, Kenner is steeped in history, culture, and entertainment. Kenner offers easy accessibility as a drive-in destination, along with convenient air service from Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY). The Pontchartrain Convention & Civic Center hosts small to large events, including trade shows, sports events, celebrations, and more. Attendees can savor endless culinary creations featuring local and international favorites, including fresh seafood and po-boys. Entertainment and attractions include Game on Social Club, Treasure Chest Casino, the Planetarium and MegaDome Cinema, and historic Rivertown.

VisitKenner.us

Courtesy Treasure Chest Casino

Paragon Casino Resort



Paragon Casino Resort, in the heart of Louisiana, offers a complete destination experience, featuring a wide range of accommodations, entertainment, dining, and recreational activities. Guests can enjoy the 64,000-square-foot casino, three pools, a full-service spa and salon, the 18-hole championship Tamahka Trails Golf Course, a live alligator habitat, Kids Quest, and Cyber Quest arcade. Tunica Biloxi Nature Trail is just steps from the hotel. Onsite dining options include Legends Steakhouse, Draft Room sports bar, Lucky Wok, Roxy's Diner, and Market Place Buffet. Paragon features three ballrooms, the Mári Showroom, and other meeting spaces.

ParagonCasinoResort.com

Courtesy Paragon Casino Resort

From the mighty Mississippi to the Great Smoky Mountains, Tennessee is where you'll find the country's most-visited national park. Tennessee was home to Elvis Presley, is home to Dolly Parton, and is considered the birthplace of country, blues, and rock 'n' roll music. Knoxville, Chattanooga, Memphis, and Nashville provide urban amenities, while smaller towns offer a laid-back atmosphere. Several state parks have luxury lodges with event space, including Fall Creek Falls and Paris Landing, with new lodges under construction at Henry Horton and Natchez Trace state parks.

EVENT PLANNERS' GUIDE TO

TN

Tennessee

BY D. FRAN MORLEY



Kingsport blends Southern hospitality and small-town charm with full-service convention facilities and outdoor adventure.

EASTERN TENNESSEE

Blount County – Greater Smokies Region

SmokyMountains.org; @PeacefulSmokies

On the “Peaceful Side of the Smokies,” the Blount County towns of Maryville, Alcoa, and Townsend offer direct access to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in a quieter, more relaxed atmosphere than busier tourism hubs, says Kim Mitchell, director of tourism development for Blount Partnership. “Our niche is retreat-style meetings with purpose. Groups can disconnect from urban distractions while enjoying professional amenities. We’re ideal for leadership retreats, board meetings, wellness events, and creative sessions.”

Connected to McGhee Tyson Airport (TYS) in Alcoa, the 241-room Hilton Knoxville Airport has 20,873 square feet of conference space. On the Maryville College campus, Clayton Center for the Arts has a 1,068-seat theater, a 244-seat recital hall, galleries,

meeting rooms, and a plaza that can host 500 guests. The 57-room boutique RT Lodge includes a restaurant, a spa, and a new glass-walled Meeting House seating 75 guests. Blackberry Farm is a 4,200-acre luxury resort with 68 guest rooms, fine dining, wellness programs, and activities. Tremont Lodge & Resort has 130 guest rooms and an event center. Dancing Bear Lodge offers cottages, cabins, and villas with event space for 50 guests.

Offsite venues include The Shed, a “smokehouse and juke joint” that can host 350 dinner guests; the 400-seat Capitol Theatre; and the 5,000-square-foot Showroom at Five Points, which accommodates 350 people.

Bristol

ExploreBristol.org; @ExploreBristol

Bristol offers planners unique options in a twin city that straddles the Tennessee/Virginia state line. According to ExploreBristol.org, visitors can learn about outdoor adventures, racing,

and live music at the recently opened Explore Bristol Visitor Center.

Bristol Motor Speedway, a major stop on the NASCAR racing circuit, offers a full event schedule, luxury suites and a hospitality village, and custom packages and teambuilding experiences.

The Birthplace of Country Music Museum is a Smithsonian-affiliated facility honoring the 1927 Bristol Sessions, which introduced country music to the world. It features a monthly speaker program, group tours, and event space that includes a 100-seat theater and 50-person-capacity multipurpose room. Full museum rental is available after hours. Looking toward the 100th anniversary of the Bristol Sessions in 2027, the city features monthly music programs highlighting the music’s evolution.

Bristol has approximately 1,500 guest rooms. Event space at the 303-room Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Bristol includes the 800-person capacity Hard Rock Live. Delta Hotels Bristol

has nearly 20,000 square feet of event space, including two ballrooms. The Bristol Hotel has 65 guest rooms and 3,800 square feet of event space. The Sessions Hotel, Bristol, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel has 70 guest rooms with indoor and outdoor event space, including a rooftop venue. A luxury resort set on 450 acres, Nicewonder Farm & Vineyards includes a 28-room inn with a 2,300-square-foot ballroom and corporate retreat and teambuilding activities.

Chattanooga

VisitChattanooga.com; @VisitChatt

Chattanooga's designation as North America's first "National Park City" reflects how the city functions day to day, according to Sean Phipps, marketing director for Chattanooga Tourism Co. "Green space, river access, and mountain trails are woven into our fabric of life," Phipps says. "Planners return here because the infrastructure is solid, the setting is dramatic, and the city consistently surprises attendees who weren't expecting much from a mid-sized Southern city."

Phipps notes that visitors can kayak on the Tennessee River, walk the 13-mile paved Tennessee Riverwalk, or hike or bike mountain trails within minutes of downtown. Hang gliding or paragliding at Lookout Mountain Flight Park offers "one of the most distinctive teambuilding options in the Southeast," he says.

On the Riverwalk, the new Erlanger Park mixed-use development is anchored by the new Chattanooga Lookouts Minor League Baseball stadium, which offers significant event space, including the 500-seat Coca-Cola Pattern Shop, the 7,000-square-foot Powerhouse, and additional spaces for up to 500 event guests.

Also new, the 184-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Chattanooga Downtown has 2,871 square feet of meeting space plus a rooftop bar. The Waymark Chattanooga, Tapestry Collection by Hilton opened in early 2026 in a restored historic downtown building; it offers 148 guest rooms and five meeting rooms. The 123-room Caption by Hyatt has event space for up to 80 guests. Two additional downtown hotels are expected to open in 2027: a 200-room Drury Plaza Downtown and Chattanooga's first AC Hotel by Marriott, which is expected to offer 135 guest rooms.

The Read House, a downtown landmark since 1872, has 241 guest rooms and 12 event spaces, including the elegant Silver Ballroom and a new 3,000-square-foot formal garden.



Clayton Center for the Arts, on the Maryville College campus in Blount County, includes a theater, a recital hall, galleries, meeting rooms, and an outdoor plaza.

The 260-room Westin Chattanooga has almost 15,000 square feet of indoor function space, plus outdoor venues, while the 199-room Chattanooga Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton has 22,061 square feet of event space. The 186-room DoubleTree by Hilton Chattanooga Downtown has 11,368 square feet of newly renovated event space, and Hotel Chalet at the iconic Chattanooga Choo Choo has traditional hotel rooms, restored vintage train cars, and indoor/outdoor event space. The 340-room Chattanooga Marriott Downtown offers 9,862 square feet of meeting space and directly connects to the Chattanooga Convention Center, which can accommodate 500 exhibit booths or seat more than 5,000 theater style. The convention center and most downtown hotels and attractions are on the city's free electric shuttle route.

Classic offsite venues include Ruby Falls, with a 3,500-square-foot event space; the Bessie Smith Cultural Center and African American Museum, with a 400-person-capacity performance hall and outdoor function areas; the Tennessee Aquarium, which accommodates up to 3,000 event guests; and the 4,000-square-foot event hall at Chattanooga Whiskey.

Approximately 90 minutes north of Chattanooga, Falls Creek Falls State Park offers nearly 30,000 acres of outdoor experiences, including its namesake 256-foot waterfall. The park features a stunning new lodge with more than 5,000 square feet of indoor event space.

Gatlinburg

**Gatlinburg.com; @TravelGburg;
@VisitGatlinburg**

At the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg is a quaint town with everything a planner needs for a successful event, according to Dave Esslinger, vice president of sales and marketing for Gatlinburg Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). "We have a beautiful, state-of-the-art convention center, more than 17,000 sleeping rooms, including full-service and limited-service hotels, cabins and condominiums, and hundreds of shops, restaurants, and entertainment attractions, including live performances for every age and interest."

The pedestrian-friendly downtown features the new 136-room Hotel Indigo Gatlinburg Downtown, with a 155-person-capacity meeting room, a 3,744-square-foot outdoor terrace, and a rooftop bar and lounge.

Gatlinburg Convention Center features a 67,000-square-foot exhibit space, a ballroom seating 2,100 people theater style, and the 8,800-square-foot Mills Auditorium. The Gatlinburg Trolley connects the convention center to most downtown hotels, attractions, and restaurants.

Hotels with event space include the 300-room Park Vista, a DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel, with 25,000 square feet of indoor event space plus an event lawn; 164-suite Embassy Suites by Hilton Gatlinburg Resort,

with 12,800 square feet of flexible meeting space; 215-room Glenstone Lodge, with 10,000 square feet of meeting space; 205-room Edgewater at the Aquarium, Hotel & Conference Center, with 7,000 square feet of function space, including a 4,800-square-foot ballroom; and 162-room Margaritaville Resort Gatlinburg, with 6,200 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space. Also, the recently renovated 130-room Black Bear Inn & Suites has event space for 250 guests; the 118-room Hilton Garden Inn Gatlinburg has 1,599 square feet of function space; and Courtyard Gatlinburg Downtown has four event rooms.

Anakeesta mountain-top adventure park has introduced new gathering spaces at Firefly Village, a new treetop skywalk, and 56 new glass-walled gondolas with 360-degree views of the mountains.

Popular attractions include Ripley’s Aquarium of the Smokies, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts, and Ober Gatlinburg Adventure Park, with seasonal skiing and summer activities. Additional outdoor attractions include whitewater rafting, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and ziplining.

Greeneville

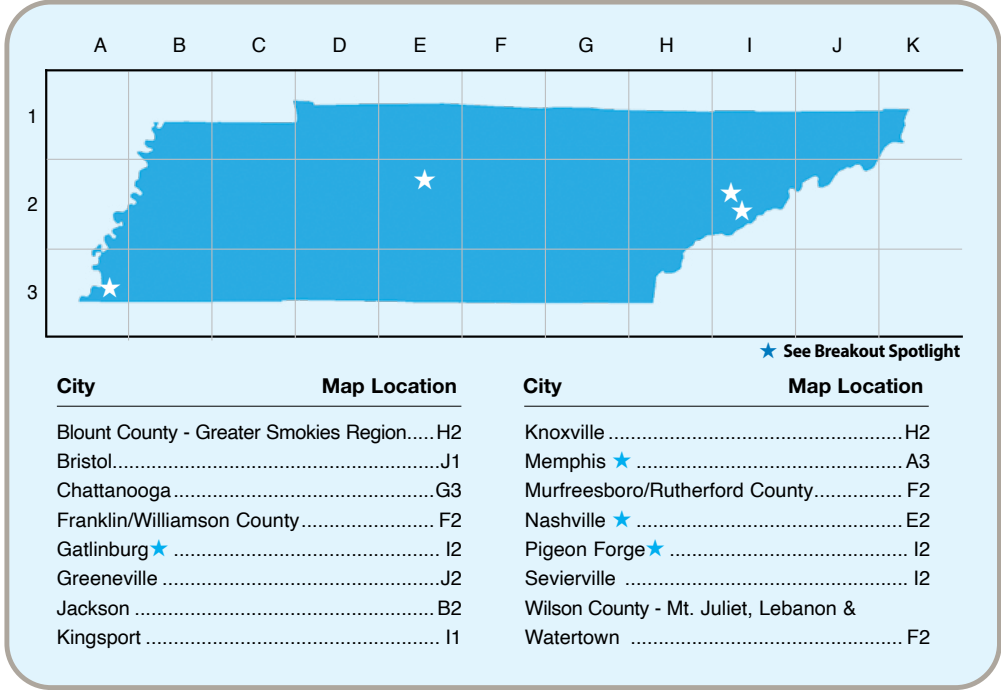
DiscoverGreenevilleTN.com;
@DiscoverGreenevilleTN

Once the capital of the short-lived, independent State of Franklin, today Greeneville is the “heart of northeast Tennessee,” according to DiscoverGreenevilleTN.com. Frontier legend and politician David Crockett and President Andrew Johnson once had homes there. Today, visitors can walk in their footsteps, and planners can make history with an event at Tusculum University, one of the oldest colleges in the country, or at the 51-room General Morgan Inn & Conference Center, a member of Historic Hotels of America. General Morgan Inn includes a 3,000-square-foot ballroom, a rooftop venue, and a 100-seat dining room. The city’s Niswonger Performing Arts Center has a 1,150-seat auditorium.

Kingsport

VisitKingsport.com; @VisitKingsport

Kingsport blends Southern hospitality with outdoor adventure, artistic flair, and small-town charm, says Lara Potter, vice president of Visit Kingsport. “We offer planners a rare combination of full-service convention



facilities, affordable accommodations, and easy access to outdoor adventure, all without the congestion or cost of larger markets. Our niche is simple: We deliver a seamless, high-touch experience where everything is within minutes, attendees feel genuinely welcomed, and planners gain a trusted partner in Visit Kingsport.”

With 305 guest rooms, the recently refreshed Marriott MeadowView Conference Resort & Convention Center has 81,563 square feet of indoor function space across 42 event spaces, including three tiered amphitheaters and multiple ballrooms. The full-service resort also offers golf and onsite dining.

There are currently 1,100 guest rooms in the city, including a 104-room TownePlace Suites, a 93-room Home2 Suites by Hilton, and a 60-room boutique property expected to open in 2027.

Offsite venues include Historic Allandale Mansion, with indoor space and outdoor venues, downtown’s Model City Event Center, and The Social. The 3,750-acre Bays Mountain Park has trails, a nature center, a planetarium, and indoor and outdoor venues to accommodate 400 guests.

Knoxville

VisitKnoxville.com; @VisitKnoxville

Meeting planners consistently praise the walkability of downtown Knoxville, where attendees can seamlessly move between conference sessions, local attractions, restaurants, and outdoor experiences, according to Pearl

Dorsey, director of sales for Visit Knoxville. “With the Knoxville Convention Center located in the heart of downtown, groups can easily make Knoxville itself an integral part of the event experience,” she says. “The result is a meeting destination that encourages curiosity at every turn and leaves attendees with stories they never expected to find.”

Downtown and adjacent to the University of Tennessee campus, the 500,000-square-foot Knoxville Convention Center features 119,922 square feet of exhibit halls, a 27,000-square-foot grand ballroom, 20 individual meeting rooms, a 19,080-square-foot outdoor terrace (adjacent to World’s Fair Park), and other specialty spaces. Connected to the center via an enclosed pedestrian bridge is the 320-room Hilton Knoxville, which offers 13,950 square feet of event space with a ballroom that seats 700 theater style. The 302-room Marriott Knoxville Downtown, which sits directly across from the convention center, has 17,746 square feet of event space, including the Assembly, which can accommodate 2,050 people for receptions. Event space at The Tennessean Hotel, an 82-room luxury boutique hotel, includes the 1,600-square-foot Governor’s Suite.

Knoxville offers more than 1,800 guest rooms within a mile of the convention center, including the 197-room Crowne Plaza Knoxville Downtown University, with more than 15,000 square feet of event space; 178-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Knoxville

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Straddling the Tennessee/Virginia state line, Bristol offers planners unique 'twin-city' options to enjoy Bristol's outdoor adventures, racing, and live music.



Downtown, with 4,588 square feet of event space; 165-room Hyatt Place Knoxville/ Downtown, which includes a rooftop lounge; and 130-room Cumberland House Knoxville, Tapestry Collection by Hilton, with 3,471 square feet of function space.

Unique stops in the city for groups include Pretentious Craft Co., where visitors can drink a beer from a hand-blown glass (both made on-site) and watch the process, from grain to glass; Knox Whiskey Works, a stop on the Tennessee Whiskey Trail; and J.C. Holdway, owned and operated by Tennessee's first James Beard Award-winning chef, Joseph Lenn, and featured on *The New York Times'* 50 Best Restaurants in America list for 2025.

Adventure seekers will enjoy kayaking or stand-up paddleboarding on the Tennessee River with Knoxville Adventure Collective; treetop ziplines, rope bridges, and swings at Navitat; and hiking or paddling at Ijams Nature Center.

Pigeon Forge

MyPigeonForge.com; @My_PigeonForge

According to Amy Warner, interim director of the Pigeon Forge Dept. of Tourism, Pigeon Forge combines the scenic beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains with world-class attractions, like Dolly Parton's Dollywood theme park. "Our small town, located just six miles from the entrance to the nation's most-visited national park, has an abundance of attractions, restaurants, dinner shows, lodging properties, and shopping options to keep everyone entertained both day and evening," Warner says.

Pigeon Forge has more than 16,000 lodging options with numerous venues for groups needing less than 50,000 square feet of space. For larger groups, the LeConte Center at Pigeon Forge has 100,500 square feet of clear-span exhibit space, a 12,000-person capacity main hall, and additional breakout and reception spaces.

Hotels with event space include the 208-room Ramsey Hotel & Convention Center, with 18,066 square feet of meeting and event space; 303-room Music Road Resort Hotel, Inn & Convention Center, with 16,000 square feet of function space; 303-room Country Cascades Waterpark Resort, with 6,000 square feet of meeting and event space; 112-room Hilton Garden Inn, with 2,595 square feet of function space, including a tiered theater; and the dual-branded Embassy Suites by Hilton Pigeon Forge Resort, with 10,672 square feet of event space, and Tempo by Hilton. The two hotels offer a total of 276 guest rooms.

At Dollywood, the 302-room HeartSong Lodge & Resort and the adjacent 300-room DreamMore Resort and Spa together offer 32,000 total square feet of indoor and outdoor space for meetings and events of up to 700 people.

Pigeon Forge has several dinner shows, including Dolly Parton's Stampede, Hatfield & McCoy Dinner Feud, Pirates Voyage Dinner & Show, and Paula Deen's Lumberjack Feud Supper Show. "The Cottage and Sawyer's Farmhouse are two new breakfast/lunch options, serving classic Southern dishes with a modern twist," Warner says, "and unique choices for excursions or teambuilding include Pink Jeep Smoky Mountain Adventure Tours and Outdoor Gravity Park, the country's only zorbing experience."

The Old Mill Historic District and Dollywood's Craftsman's Valley are home to artisans who carry on Appalachian traditions in pottery, blacksmithing, milling, leatherworking, and candle making.

Sevierville

VisitSevierville.com; @VisitSevierville

Sevierville is a popular vacation destination in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. "Our downtown is the only true walkable downtown in our region," says Luke Fall, communications assistant for Visit Sevierville. "Visitors will find historic, restored architecture, interpretive history displays, chef-driven restaurants, local shops, and nightlife and entertainment, along with public art, including the iconic bronze statue of Dolly Parton, our hometown hero."

Sevierville Convention Center includes a 108,245-square-foot exhibit hall, four ballrooms, meeting rooms, pre-function spaces, and 54,000 square feet of outdoor space. The convention center is connected to the 706-room Wilderness at the Smokies Hotel & Waterpark Resort, which also includes cabins, villas, and meeting space for events of up to 135 attendees.

Additional event venues include Hidden Mountain Resort, with cabins that sleep up to 40 people and several event spaces, including The Lodge; Sevierville Golf Club, with a clubhouse and large outside pavilion; and the 7,500-square-foot Sevierville Civic Center, which seats up to 300 guests.

Middle Tennessee

Franklin/Williamson County

VisitFranklin.com; @VisitFranklinTN

Franklin offers serious meeting capabilities and one-of-a-kind venues for bringing real personality to events, notes Mathew Maxey, senior director of public relations for Visit Franklin. "Our historic downtown is a charming 16-block district of shops, restaurants, coffeehouses, and attractions that continues to earn national accolades," he says. "Within this district, the Downtown Convention Campus features 39 different locations with meeting spaces of various sizes, anchored by the 119-room Harpeth Franklin Downtown, Curio Collection by Hilton, which has 7,719 square feet of function space. As a planner, you can host a keynote session in a venue like the

Top: Paris Landing State Park
Bottom: Pickwick Landing State Park

Top left: Aerial Innovations Southeast, bottom left: Van Edgins, bottom right: Rick Smith

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322-seat Franklin Theatre, then transition into breakout sessions, lunches, or receptions at a variety of walkable downtown spots.”

Beyond its Civil War-era downtown, Franklin is home to more than 200 national and international corporate headquarters in the Cool Springs business district, which offers two event hotels: the 300-room Franklin Marriott Cool Springs, with 23,745 square feet of function space, and the 250-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Franklin Cool Springs, with 26,875 square feet of function space. There are more than 6,300 guest rooms in the immediate Franklin area.

Just north of downtown, The Park at Harlinsdale Farm, once a renowned breeding farm for Tennessee Walking Horses, today features horseback riding trails, walking and running paths, and a newly restored Main Barn event space and an adjacent event lawn.

Southall Farm & Inn, a 325-acre luxury resort and working farm, has 62 guest rooms and 16 cottages with IACC-certified event space, including the 250-person capacity Orchard Event Center and Patio. The resort also features a spa, two restaurants, and a variety of farm, wellness, and adventure activities. The Factory at Franklin is a recently renovated retail, dining, and entertainment facility with the 10,000-square-foot Turner Theater and the 1,500-person-capacity Liberty Hall. Graystone Quarry is a 160-acre reclaimed limestone quarry with indoor and outdoor event space, including the Gathering Hall.

Popular attractions around Franklin include Arrington Vineyards for picnics, wine tastings, and live music; Natchez Trace Parkway; and the little town of Leiper’s Fork, with antique shops, art galleries, a winery, and live-music venues, where many big-name stars were discovered and others often make unannounced appearances.

Murfreesboro/ Rutherford County

VisitRutherfordTN.com; @VisitRutherfordTN

Approximately 30 miles south of Nashville, Rutherford County and the communities of Murfreesboro, Smyrna, La Vergne, and Eagleville offer convenience to all the Nashville metro area offers without the hassle of the big city, along with flexible venues and modern amenities for small gatherings to large conferences, according to VisitRutherfordTN.com.

In Murfreesboro, a 120-room TownePlace Suites Murfreesboro opened in fall 2025, and

The 340-room Chattanooga Marriott Downtown offers 9,862 square feet of meeting space as a complement to the connected Chattanooga Convention Center.



Courtesy Chattanooga Tourism Co.

a 95-room AVID Hotel is expected to open by late 2026.

Located at The Avenue shopping and dining destination, the 283-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Nashville SE Murfreesboro has 63,060 square feet of event space, including a 28,800-square-foot ballroom, and the 100-room Hilton Garden Inn Murfreesboro has two meeting rooms. The 169-room DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Murfreesboro offers 3,840 square feet of event space, while the 112-room Hilton Garden Inn Nashville/Smyrna has three function rooms with space to seat 120 guests banquet style.

Offsite venues include The View at Fountains, with 5,800 square feet of indoor space and a 1,900-square-foot covered terrace; the Tennessee Ballroom at Middle Tennessee State University, which seats 500 guests theater style or 420 banquet style; and Williamson Family Farm, a 240-acre campus with more than 10,000 square feet of climate-controlled space.

Nashville

VisitMusicCity.com; @VisitMusicCity

While it’s home to more than 250 live-music venues, Nashville is more than its “Music City” name implies, says Deana Ivey, president and CEO of Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. “We are a community of makers—musicians, chefs, designers, and other visionaries—who bring that creative

spirit to life through hands-on experiences like songwriting sessions, culinary classes, and locally crafted goods that create lasting impacts and foster meaningful connections. The true spirit of ‘Music City,’ infused with Southern charm, offers the perfect backdrop for every type of gathering.”

Anchored by The Pinnacle, a 4,500-seat music venue, Nashville Yards is downtown’s newest development, with an urban park, retail, entertainment, residential, and hotels, including the 591-room Grand Hyatt Nashville, with 84,000 square feet of meeting and event space, and the historic Union Station Nashville Yards, with 125 bespoke guest rooms and 11,000 square feet of elegantly restored function space.

Nashville’s latest hotel properties include the 260-room Motto by Hilton Nashville Downtown; 181-room Canopy by Hilton Nashville Downtown The Gulch, with 5,477 square feet of event space; and Dolly Parton’s SongTeller Hotel, which is expected to open soon with 10,000 square feet of themed event space.

Nashville’s downtown convention facility is Music City Center, which features 1.2 million square feet of usable space, including 61 meeting rooms, a 353,143-square-foot exhibit hall, a 57,500-square-foot grand ballroom, and a variety of pre-function and reception areas. The center is adjacent to Bridgestone Arena and surrounded by hotels, including the 800-room Omni Nashville Hotel, with 80,000 square feet of event space; 506-room Embassy

Suites by Hilton Nashville Downtown, with 35,417 square feet of function space; and 330-room Hilton Nashville Downtown, with 26,969 square feet of meeting and event space.

Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center expects to complete a multi-phase \$224 million expansion for spring 2027, according to Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. The work includes upgrades (either already underway or completed) to existing ballroom and pre-function spaces, a new sports bar, and outdoor event amenities, plus a major expansion adding approximately 108,000 square feet of new meeting space, including a 31,000-square-foot ballroom, breakout rooms, and pre-function spaces. The project is expected to bring the property to approximately 756,000 square feet of dedicated meeting and event space. With 2,800 guest rooms, the expansion will solidify the property's status as the largest non-gaming hotel in the United States based on exhibit and meeting space.

Additional downtown hotels include the 673-room Renaissance Nashville Hotel, with 112,498 square feet of event space; 533-room JW Marriott Nashville, with 79,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space; 494-room Sheraton Grand Nashville Downtown, with 28,755 square feet of recently renovated event space; the 456-room Westin Nashville, with 28,241 square feet of space; and 346-room W Nashville, with 37,672 square feet of indoor and outdoor space. There are nearly 15,000 hotel rooms in downtown and 42,536 in Davidson County.

Unique offsite venues include The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, with a 10,000-square-foot event hall, two theaters, a rooftop terrace, a rotunda, and additional event spaces, plus a building buy-out option; the 4,000-seat Grand Ole Opry House, located near Gaylord Opryland Resort; the historic 2,362-seat Ryman Auditorium in downtown; the National Museum of African American Music,

with boardrooms, lounge space, galleries, a 184-seat theater, and a lobby concourse that can host a 500-person reception; and GEODIS Park (home to Nashville SC Soccer), with a 30,000-seat stadium and numerous indoor event venues to host events of up to 1,000 guests.

Wilson County – Mt. Juliet, Lebanon & Watertown

VisitWilsonTN.com; @VisitWilco

Wilson County is minutes away from Nashville, but without the crowds and high prices, according to Jason Johnson, director of Wilson County CVB. "We offer outdoor adventures at Cedars of Lebanon State Park, family-friendly attractions, such as Fiddlers Grove Historic Village, local Southern dining restaurants, and farm-to-table experiences," he says. "In Wilson County, you'll find historic downtowns, plus recognized events like NASCAR and IndyCar racing. We're also

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the home of the Tennessee State Fair, with local fairs and community events that make everyone feel welcome.”

The county’s largest event space is the Farm Bureau Expo Center in Lebanon, which includes a 45,000-plus-square-foot main exhibit hall seating up to 6,600 people theater style, a 7,000-square-foot South Hall for banquets of up to 500 guests, and more than 7,000 square feet of extra concourse space. Additional event spaces include the 400-seat Capitol Theatre and The Mill at Lebanon, which includes the Grand Hall and spaces for networking events, fundraisers, and classes. Wild Turkey Ranch, a 52-acre property across from Cedars of Lebanon State Park, has multiple indoor and outdoor event spaces, while Billy Goat Hill Retreat, an 11-acre property, offers multiple spaces for events of up to 100 guests.

The dual-branded Hilton Garden Inn Mt. Juliet and Tru by Hilton Mt. Juliet have a total of 172 guest rooms and meeting space for 300 attendees. Courtyard Nashville Mt. Juliet has 3,195 square feet of function space.

WESTERN TENNESSEE

Jackson

VisitJacksonTN.com; @VisitJacksonTN

The home of Carl Perkins and the inimitable Tina Turner, Jackson is where country and blues collided to create rockabilly. Today, the city embraces all genres of music across the generations, according to VisitJacksonTN.com

Larger venues include Carl Perkins Civic Center, with a 2,200-seat auditorium; Ned McWherter Cultural Arts Center, with a 420-seat theater, galleries, and meeting rooms; New Southern Hotel event venue, with space to seat 400 guests; and Samuel T. Bryant Distillery, with a 3,600-square-foot tasting room.

The 168-room DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Jackson has 6,230 square feet of function space, while the 98-room Hilton Garden Inn Jackson can seat 100 guests theater style.

Casey Jones Village includes the award-winning Old Country Store and Restaurant, along with the historic Casey Jones home and railroad museum. Rusty’s TV and Movie Car Museum features iconic cars, trucks, motorcycles, and props. In nearby Alamo, the Tennessee Safari Park offers a 7.5-mile drive-through safari and a 20-acre zoo.

Approximately 90 minutes north of Jackson, Paris Landing State Park features a recently



Ijams Nature Center is a popular attraction for hiking in Knoxville.

City of Knoxville Parks & Rec Courtesy Visit Knoxville

opened lodge on the Tennessee River; the lodge offers 91 guest rooms and more than 6,000 square feet of function space, including a 160-person-capacity ballroom.

Memphis

MemphisTravel.com; @MemphisTravel

“We’re primarily known as the home of the blues, soul, and rock ‘n’ roll, but this is our year of arts culture, and we have many new additions,” says Malvin Gipson, chief sales officer of convention sales, sports, and services for Memphis Tourism. “The Memphis Art Museum opens a new riverfront home with 23 galleries, a studio, and rooftop sculpture garden; the Metal Museum relocates to Overton Park; and our RiverArts Fest celebrates a 20-year anniversary.”

Memphis is home to world-famous Beale Street, Elvis Presley’s Graceland, Sun Studio, more than 185 local bars and restaurants with authentic live music, and more than 100 barbecue restaurants. “We have a diverse culinary story and award-winning chefs, and in 2025, five of our restaurants were recognized by MICHELIN,” Gipson adds.

Renasant Convention Center features a 118,000-square-foot, column-free exhibit hall with views of the Mississippi River, a new exterior concourse, 46 breakout rooms, a flex space that can convert to a 67,500-square-foot ballroom, and a smaller ballroom. The convention center connects to the 600-room Memphis Riverline Hotel (formerly the Sheraton), which is undergoing a \$250 million renovation, expected to be completed in 2029, after being acquired by the City of Memphis.

The National Civil Rights Museum unveiled a new Legacy Experience this year, marking

the museum’s 35th anniversary. It offers lobby, classroom, and theater event space. The historic AAA Four Diamond Peabody Memphis has completed a \$19 million makeover of its 464 guest rooms, according to Memphis Travel. The hotel has 80,000 square feet of event space. The first phase of Baron Von Oppenbean and the River of Time (BVO), an immersive adventure experience on Mud Island, is now open with explorable environments, interactive storytelling, and art. The attraction is designed to evolve and grow with the community.

Elvis Presley’s Graceland has more than 100,000 total square feet of event space. The 20,000-square-foot Graceland Soundstage can seat 1,700 banquet guests, the Graceland Exhibition Center has two 10,000-square-foot bays, and the 450-room Guest House at Graceland includes a 464-seat theater and 17,000 square feet of function space. An event at the Graceland Entertainment Complex allows attendees to explore connecting entertainment and museum venues.

Inside the iconic Memphis Pyramid, the 103-room Big Cypress Lodge overlooks Bass Pro Shops at the Pyramid and offers indoor event rooms for 150 guests. When combined with the outdoor Mississippi Terrace, the space can accommodate receptions for up to 570 guests.

Additional convention hotels include The AAA Four Diamond Westin Memphis Beale Street, with 18,119 square feet of event space; Central Station Memphis, Curio Collection by Hilton, with space to accommodate 500 reception guests; and Hyatt Centric Beale Street Memphis, with 9,000 square feet of indoor space and additional outdoor spaces. There are 4,218 guest rooms in downtown Memphis. 🌊



Thomas Watkins

Embassy Suites by Hilton Gatlinburg Resort



Embassy Suites by Hilton Gatlinburg Resort, bordering Great Smoky Mountains National Park, offers endless scenic mountain beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities. Amenities include an indoor pool, a resort-style pool with a spiral slide and lazy river, multiple firepits, an activity lawn, and a restaurant and bar. Groups can take advantage of 12,800 square feet of meeting space featuring state-of-the-art audiovisual capabilities, as well as onsite teambuilding activities. The hotel is conveniently located just minutes from Gatlinburg Convention Center, within walking distance of downtown, and along the Gatlinburg Trolley route.

EmbassySuites.com/Gatlinburg

The Guest House at Graceland



Graceland offers more than 20 unique spaces for everything from small, private events with a "King of Rock 'n' Roll" flair to large-scale receptions reflecting your own design. Just a few steps from the gates of Elvis Presley's Graceland Mansion is The Guest House at Graceland, a AAA Four Diamond resort hotel. With 430 spacious guest rooms, 20 themed specialty suites, and more than 22,000 square feet of meeting, theater, and pre-function space, it offers a turnkey solution for groups of up to 1,200 people.

Graceland.com

Pigeon Forge Dept. of Tourism

Pigeon Forge



Located just five miles from the entrance to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Pigeon Forge provides a beautiful backdrop for meetings and events. Planners can choose from the 200,000-square-foot LeConte Event Center at Pigeon Forge, as well as more than 20 smaller venues throughout the city. Attendees can enjoy more than 100 restaurants, great theaters, and more than 100 attractions, including Dollywood Theme Park, Titanic Museum Attraction, Lumberjack Adventure Park, Pink Jeep Tours, The Island in Pigeon Forge, and other unique activities they won't find elsewhere.

PigeonForgeMeeting.com

Tennessee State Parks



Tennessee State Parks provide a serene, natural setting for inspired meetings. Outdoor venues, along with lodges with meeting rooms, premium amenities, onsite restaurants, and catering, make events easy and convenient. Planners can choose from four current venues to suit their needs: The Lodge at Fall Creek Falls, The Lodge at Montgomery Bell, The Lodge at Pickwick Landing, and The Lodge at Paris Landing. Lodges are also under construction at Natchez Trace State Park and Henry Horton State Park. Dedicated event specialists can help create memorable experiences at Tennessee State Parks.

TNStateParks.com

Aerial Innovations Southeast

Closing Remarks

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Debuts New Event Venue

By Helen Jacob

Courtesy Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin



The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is ready to make magic with the unveiling of its new two-story Peninsula Ballroom and Event Space. Connected to the Dolphin hotel, the striking venue is the centerpiece of a \$300 million renovation and expansion, and the largest transformation in the property's history.

Created to bring a little extra magic to meetings and conventions, the new space is designed to inspire planners, engage attendees, and set the stage for standout events. The official ribbon-cutting is set for September 10.

The two-story event venue adds more than 100,000 square feet of new event space. With the new addition, the resort now offers approximately 600,000 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor meeting space across the Swan, Dolphin, and Swan Reserve properties—making it the largest convention hotel on the East Coast.

Connected to the Dolphin's existing convention facilities, the two-story annex is designed to give planners more contiguous space for general sessions, exhibits, meals, networking events, and concurrent programs. The facility includes 40,000 square feet of multipurpose space, a 38,000-square-foot divisible ballroom, and 38,000 square feet of pre-function space.

"We're thrilled to reach this milestone," says Jim Curtis, director of sales and marketing for Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin. "This expansion allows our repeat groups to continue to grow with us into the future and opens up possibilities for new events. We can't wait to welcome planners and show them what's next."

The expansion incorporates design elements associated with architect Michael Graves, whose work shaped the original Swan and Dolphin hotels. The new two-story venue combines water-inspired motifs with

warm wood finishes and contemporary details. Its arrival experience features a grand hallway, wide staircase and escalators, and massive integrated digital signage, making it an impactful pre-function space for a variety of events.

In addition to the two-story venue, the property-wide transformation includes upgrades to existing meeting venues and technology improvements. The Swan and Dolphin have refreshed ballrooms, corridors, air walls, carpeting, and breakout spaces. Updated meeting areas feature a brighter palette of white, blue, gray, and natural wood, reinforcing the property's water-inspired design.

For planners, the expanded pre-function areas provide more space for registration, sponsor exhibits, receptions, and informal networking. The connection between the annex and the existing convention space is intended to improve traffic flow while allowing groups to use the facility for larger programs or multiple events operating simultaneously.

Groups also have access to 23 restaurants and lounges across the complex. The 2025 opening of Bourbon Steak Orlando, chef Michael Mina's modern steakhouse concept inside the Dolphin, adds a premium dining option for client entertainment, small-group dinners, and private events.

The resort campus includes 2,619 guest rooms, luxury rooms, and suites across the Swan, Dolphin, and Swan Reserve properties. Renovations to the Swan guest rooms were completed in 2025, and renovations to the Dolphin guest rooms are underway.

With the Peninsula Ballroom and Event Space now open, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin offers planners a larger, more integrated convention campus within the Walt Disney World Resort, combining substantial meeting capacity with resort accommodations, dining, and theme-park access. 🍷

www.conventionsouth.com



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Meetings & Moments

Baton Rouge is always on the move—trying new things, serving up what's next, and making it easy for planners to do the same. From rooftop receptions to riverfront strolls, our right-sized city keeps it fresh without overcomplicating the plan.

Our latest addition is Court to Table, a new experience where your group can rally on the pickleball court, then dive into the local food and live music, all in one seamless outing. Or, step into Red Stick Social—housed in a 103-year-old historic gem that spans five levels with a full-service restaurant, two bars, Brunswick bowling alleys, and a spacious live music venue.

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