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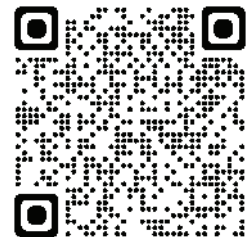


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ON THE COVER: The New York State Capitol and "The Egg," a performing arts facility, are iconic elements of the Albany skyline. Photo by Sean Pavone.

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Susan
Shaffette



pioneer publishing inc.

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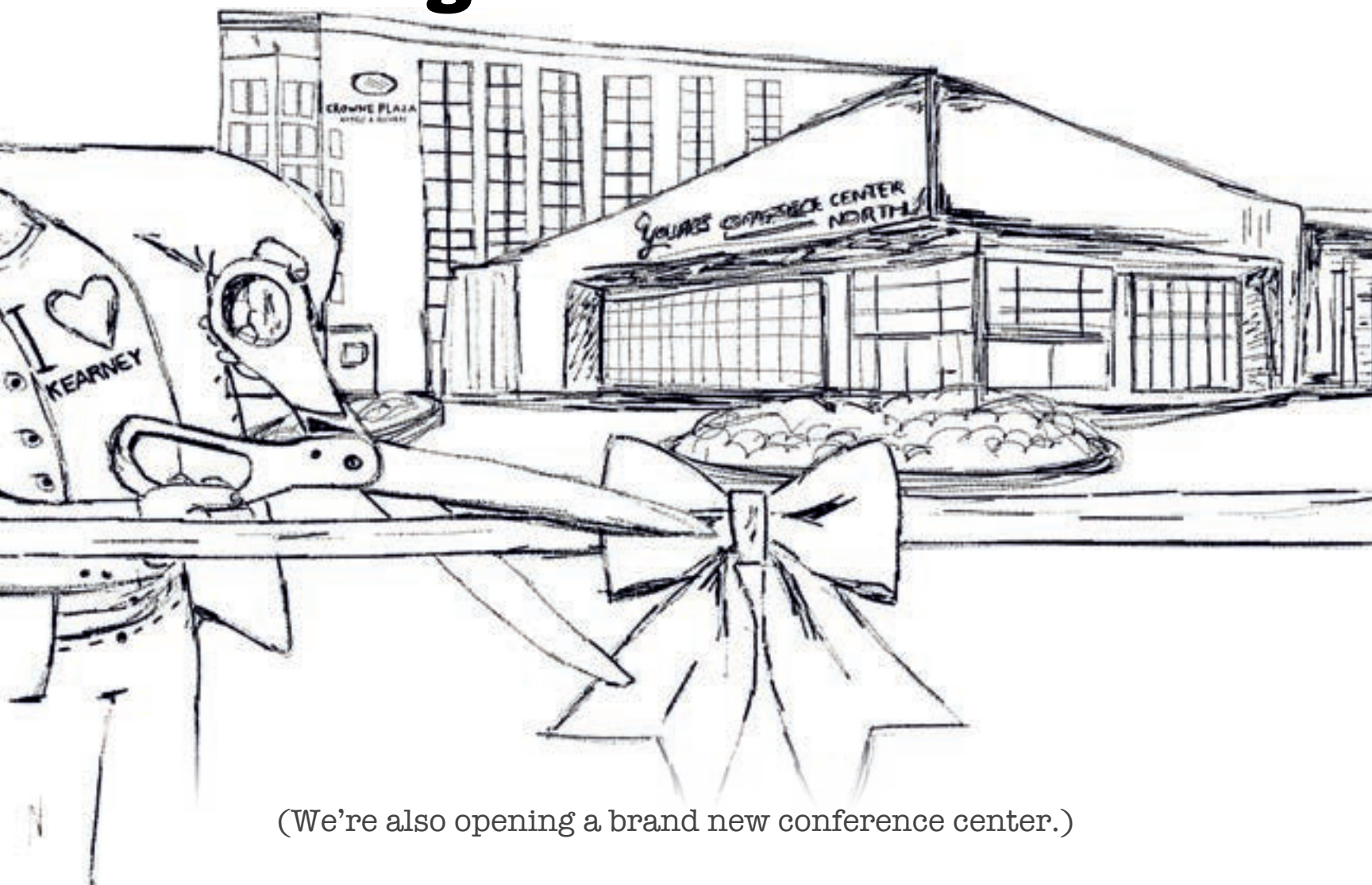
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We finally get to use the giant scissors.



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Kearney, where the Heartland gathers. 《



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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As Americans barrel back into the ballroom, meeting planners might want to change their approach to keeping groups fed. As many people spent their days working from home, what and when they ate changed. Their bodies — and minds — also forgot what it is like to sit in conference rooms, listening and learning, for several days at a stretch. At meetings, food and drink do more than fight hunger. They are the fuel we need to recharge our brains.

To make sure your event's food and beverage service is setting your attendees up for success, consider incorporating some of these innovative culinary ideas.

These **culinary tweaks** could supercharge meeting **productivity**



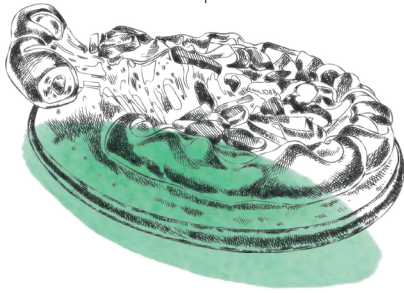
Show **breakfast** some love.

The pandemic has altered Americans' eating patterns. A recent poll shows that since 2020, we've become more enthusiastic about breakfast — more than half of respondents said they loved breakfast more than they did before the pandemic. Who knows why? Maybe we're not in such a rush to make the morning commute and can actually sit down to eat our Pop-Tarts. Perhaps a piece of warm toast or bowl of oatmeal was a comfort. The trend is something to keep in mind as planners create morning menus. Realizing that few Americans sit down to a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon each day, and that we eat lots of different foods for our morning meal, perhaps try breakfast stations with a more diverse selection: golden waffles with fresh fruit in one corner, an oatmeal bar with add-ins like nuts and berries in another corner, and breakfast burritos or avocado toast in a third.



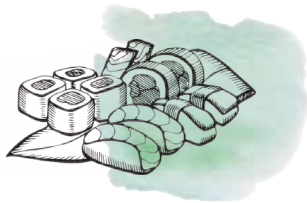
Think of food as **brain fuel**.

Working from home has offered the luxury of all-day snacking. By working with the catering department, you can ensure attendees have meals and snacks throughout the day. Consider the fuel needed to keep everyone alert and engaged. Mornings can deliver protein like eggs, yogurt and lean meats. To avoid the inevitable afternoon energy dip, steer clear of heavy and sugar-laden lunches. Mid-morning and afternoon caffeine pick-me-ups can take varied forms — espresso, traditional coffees, herbal and regular teas, energy drinks — but also dark chocolate. You could even double up on the energy-packing punch by offering chocolate-covered coffee beans. Simple snacks can be satisfying without being fattening. Fire up a popcorn machine; dress up yogurt, regular or frozen, with add-ins like trail mix or fresh fruit.



Add a twist with **local treats**.

The pandemic also put a lot of pressure on local producers and restaurants, and now they could use the support of visitors to their city. Many meeting venues are helping out by using local products when possible. There's a lot to be said for adding local twists to menus. Convention attendees in Savannah will remember that cobbler made with Georgia peaches. Green chiles, the pride of New Mexico, can spice up anything from cheeseburgers to breakfast burritos. Choose a sustainable-minded convention partner and your meeting's leftovers might also benefit others. The Salem (Oregon) Convention Center, for example, donates an average of 600 meals a week to Union Gospel Mission. Those meals are concocted from unused food for conference clients. The center also composts all its food waste.



Anticipate **dietary differences**.

Remember when "vegetarian" was the only alternative option at sit-down dinners? Today, a planner must be aware of and prepared for a long list of dietary needs and restrictions. Top of the list are food allergies like seafood, nuts, dairy and gluten, but most any crowd is also likely to include those who are vegetarians, pescatarians and vegans, as well as those following kosher or halal diets. Given the prevalence of diabetes, diners with the disease probably should get more consideration. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 12 percent of the U.S. population has been diagnosed with diabetes, about 3 percent are undiagnosed and 38 percent of those 16 and older have prediabetes. That means that for better health, more than half of the adult population should shift away from sugar and carbohydrates. A good start might be to offer fewer sodas and sweetened beverages, more salads (without calorie-heavy dressings), fewer starches and breads, less fried food and healthier desserts like fresh fruit.



Keep the **water flowing**.

As the Massachusetts public health office points out on its website, drinking too little water affects how you think and feel. "Being mildly dehydrated can contribute to low energy, anxiety, nervousness, depression and trouble thinking clearly," the site says. Considering the time, effort and money spent on meetings, it certainly pays to keep brains engaged by investing in a low-cost commodity like water.

Look for meeting venues that are forward thinking in terms of keeping the water flowing. Many hotels and convention centers have installed hydration stations, making it easy to keep water bottles filled without water waste. With 24 water bottle filling stations, the Oregon Convention Center in Portland ensures refills are easily accomplished.

The Louisville Convention Center is rightly proud of its city's water — deemed by experts as some of the most drinkable in the country. Hydration stations throughout the center supply this topnotch tap water. And don't forget: There are souls who can't abide water's taste — or lack of taste. Convention centers like the Overland Park (Kansas) Convention Center will infuse water dispensers with fruit to inspire more sipping.

JOIN US FOR A SITE INSPECTION IN MYRTLE BEACH IN NOVEMBER

Are you looking for an oceanfront destination for your next conference, incentive meeting, golf tournament or executive event? Discover an abundance of options in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, when you join Small Market Meetings for a site inspection there this fall.

Known for its resorts, golf courses, dynamic attractions and 60 miles of coastline, the Myrtle Beach area is an ideal destination that increases meeting attendance and entices delegates to stay over with their families. You can discover the city's charm and event venues when you join the staff of Small Market Meetings in Myrtle Beach in November.

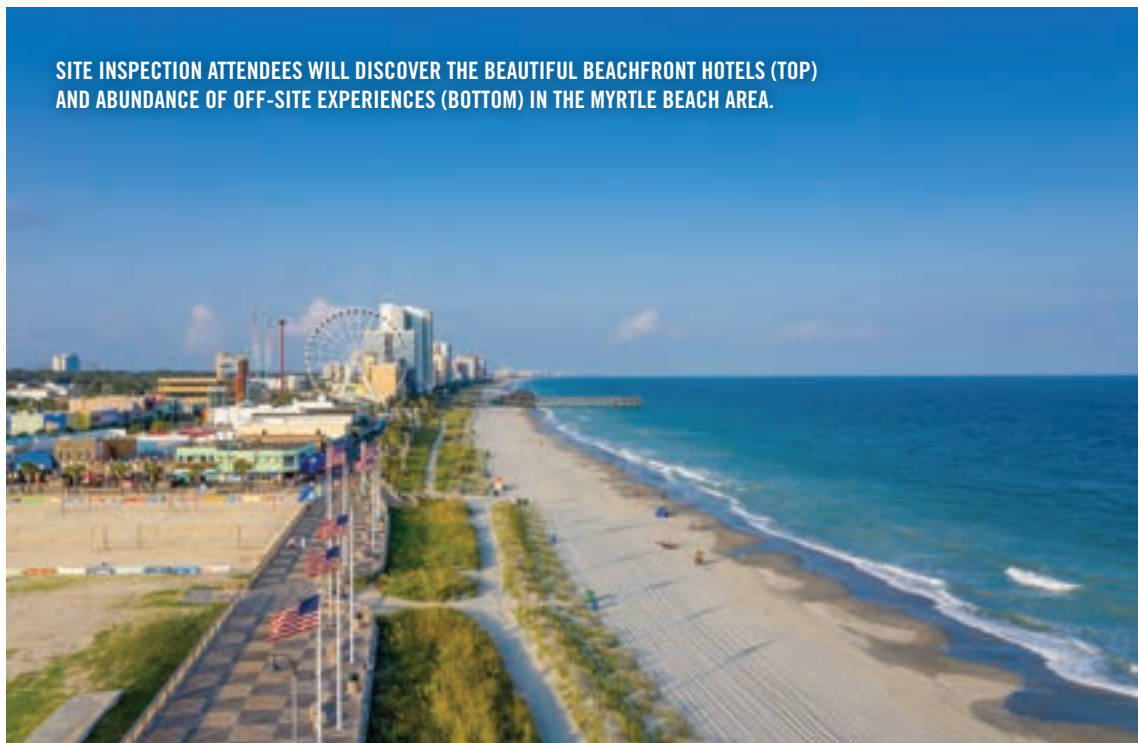
The Myrtle Beach Area Convention and Visitors Bureau is inviting up to 15 of our meeting planner readers to enjoy a four-day site inspection trip, November 8-11. Qualified meeting planners will be guests of the Myrtle Beach Area CVB staff and will visit accommodations, small meeting venues and attractions around the city.

If you are selected to attend, the Myrtle Beach Area CVB will reimburse your airfare up to \$400.

"Join Small Market Meetings' executive editor Herb Sparrow and Kelly Tyner, our vice president of sales and marketing, for this fun and educational site inspection trip to experience Myrtle Beach's enticing beachfront hotels and distinctive meeting venues," said publisher Mac Lacy. "Herb and Kelly will accompany our Myrtle Beach hosts on this trip and will be sharing their travel experiences with everyone in attendance."

All accommodations, sightseeing, transportation and meals are included while participants are in Myrtle Beach. This readership event and site inspection tour is limited to 15 qualified meeting planners.

SITE INSPECTION ATTENDEES WILL DISCOVER THE BEAUTIFUL BEACHFRONT HOTELS (TOP) AND ABUNDANCE OF OFF-SITE EXPERIENCES (BOTTOM) IN THE MYRTLE BEACH AREA.



HERB SPARROW



KELLY TYNER

Photos courtesy Myrtle Beach Area CVB

APPLICANTS WILL COMPLETE A BRIEF COMPANY PROFILE ONLINE THAT WILL BE USED BY THE MYRTLE BEACH AREA CVB TO SELECT ATTENDEES. REGISTRATION DEADLINE IS **SEPTEMBER 1**. TO SUBMIT YOUR PROFILE, GO TO **SMALLMARKETMEETINGS.COM/MYRTLE-BEACH-FAM**. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL KELLY AT **866-356-5128**.

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TAKING FLIGHT

Meeting planners will discover Wichita's innovative spirit at the Small Market Meetings Conference

BY DAN DICKSON

Wichita is more than just the largest city in Kansas.

With 390,000 inhabitants, it's a destination long known for its Western heritage and aviation history. And its modern version is gaining traction because of its culture, arts, entertainment, dining, shopping, festivals and family attractions.

This emerging city will host the next Small Market Meetings Conference October 2-4 at the Hyatt Regency Wichita. During two marketplace sessions, planners will sit down with representatives from cities, states, regions, resorts and attractions to explore doing business together for future events. It is business networking at its finest.

"We are thrilled to host Small Market Meetings here in Wichita," said Susie Santo, president and CEO of Visit Wichita. "Our team is putting together an exciting mix of business and off-site activities for the planners."

Meeting planners, she said, are a coveted professional group for a city like Wichita. "Our goal is to help the planners see how flexible and easy it is to host a meeting in Wichita," said Santo. "We add value at every step of the process."

WAY BACK WHEN

First, some Wichita history. The city got its name from the Wichita Native American tribe that settled in the area in the mid-1800s. The first white settler, a frontier entrepreneur named J.R. Mead, opened the first trading post in 1863 to serve cowboys driving cattle up from Texas on the Chisholm Trail. Seven years later, Wichita was incorporated as a city and earned the nickname "Cowtown."

The cattle business eventually waned, but the local economy got another boost in 1918 when a major oil reserve was discovered. The fresh oil money allowed local investors to help fund the fledgling aviation industry, which was coming on strong in Wichita.



HYATT REGENCY WICHITA ON THE ARKANSAS RIVER



THE DRURY PLAZA HOTEL BROADVIEW ENTRANCE



THE RIVERVIEW ROOM AT DRURY PLAZA HOTEL BROADVIEW



STANDING 44 FEET TALL ABOVE THE BANKS OF THE ARKANSAS RIVER, THE KEEPER OF THE PLAINS STATUE HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF WICHITA'S PAST AND PRESENT.

All photos courtesy Visit Wichita

Manufacturers like Cessna, Beech Aircraft and Stearman brought aviation advancements to Wichita. Their plants produced aircraft that helped win World War II.

"I believe people expect us to have Western history, but they don't expect the amazing aviation connection, being the Air Capital of the World," Santo said.

Kansas has many aviation connections. Aviator Charles Lindbergh often flew into and out of Wichita. Amelia Earhart was born in the state. In the late 1940s, Wichita's airport was one of the busiest in the U.S., mainly because it was a good mid-continent stopover. The airport is named for former president and Kansas native Dwight D. Eisenhower. McConnell Air Force Base is in Wichita.

Today, Wichita remains a leader in the aircraft industry, producing 35 percent of the country's general aviation aircraft. Major brands active in Greater Wichita include Textron Aviation with Beechcraft/Cessna Aircraft Company, Bombardier LearJet, Airbus and Spirit AeroSystems.

GETTING WORK DONE

With 200,000 square feet of meeting and exhibition space, the Century II Performing Arts and Convention Center is the largest meeting facility in the city. The largest spaces are 90,000 square feet.

The center is connected to the 303-room Hyatt Regency Wichita, which makes it easy for meeting attendees to quickly walk to their hotel rooms. Together, the center and hotel have 28 meeting spaces.

Two performing arts theaters offer other possibilities. A concert hall seats nearly 2,200 and has state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems for everything from an audio-visual presentation to a lecture or a musical. The Carl A. Bell Jr. Convention Hall seats just over 5,000 people for presentations or stage productions.

"The Hyatt is located downtown along the river near walking paths," Santo said. "It has easy access to the many downtown entertainment options and is within walking

SMALL MARKET MEETINGS

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distance to the 44-foot tall Keeper of the Plains, the city's most iconic landmark."

Other major hotels include the Drury Plaza Hotel Broadview Wichita, a historic hotel built in 1922 that's been restored and modernized. It has 200 guest rooms and 15,000 square feet of meeting space.

Another busy event space, the Intrust Bank Arena, seats about 15,000. It stages major concerts and shows as well as games for the Wichita Thunder professional hockey team and, occasionally, Wichita State men's basketball. The arena has 22 suites, two party suites and more than 300 premium seats.

SEE AND DO

A first-time visitor to Wichita should see the Keeper of the Plains, located at the confluence of the Arkansas (pronounced locally as Ar-Kansas) and the Little Arkansas rivers. The 44-foot-high steel sculpture of a Native Amer-

ican sits on land Native Americans consider sacred. It is adjacent to the Mid-America All-Indian Center. Displays around the sculpture's base depict various tribes that once inhabited the area. Every evening, the surrounding plaza glows when the Ring of Fire flame is lighted.

Wichita is also home to the Sedgwick County Zoo, with 3,000 animals representing 400 species. The animals are grouped geographically and live in settings as close as possible to their natural environments.

In addition to an excellent zoo, the area is home to Tanganyika Wildlife Park, which allows visitors to meet wildlife up close at 10 interactive stations.

STILL MORE

Botanica, the Wichita Gardens, changes with the seasons with surprises around every corner. In the spring, more than 50,000 tulips and 120,000 daffodils burst into bloom along with flowering shrubs and wildflowers. The gardens remain lush green and colorful throughout the summer and fall. Even winter is a good time to visit. Programs and tours are available for groups that wish to wander.

Museums flourish in Wichita, and visitors are sure to find several they will enjoy in the River District. The Wichita Art Museum has internationally renowned collections. The history of the world can be explored at the Museum of World Treasures. The city's finest science center is called Exploration Place. Visitors can explore the inspirational Kansas African American Museum.

The Old Town area includes the oldest open-air museum in the central U.S. Among the 54 historic and re-created buildings in the Old Cowtown Museum is a period farm with outbuildings. All this living history is just off the original Chisholm Trail, where cattle were driven over 150 years ago.

The Kansas Aviation Museum chronicles the city's connections to the aviation industry with a world-class collection of memorabilia.

"I believe people expect us to have Western history, but they don't expect the amazing aviation connection, being the Air Capital of the World."

— Susie Santo, Visit Wichita



A MEETING SPACE AT OLD COWTOWN MUSEUM



THE CHILDREN'S GARDEN AT BOTANICA

By Trevor Hawkin



A HANDS-ON ENCOUNTER AT
TANGANYIKA WILDLIFE PARK



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Learn more at [VisitWichita.com](https://www.visitwichita.com) or use this QR code to request a Meeting Planners Guide.

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OTHER DISTRICTS

Old Town is in the heart of Wichita, just east of downtown. It is known for its converted brick warehouses, brick-lined streets and period lampposts. People flock there for the dining, unusual shops, fun nightlife and enjoyable attractions. Popular stops include River City Brewing, Mort's Martini and Cigar Bar, and Public at the Brickyard.

The Delano District is at the end of the Chisholm Trail. It's where cowboys blew off steam at saloons and gambling halls after months on the cattle trail. Today it is a thriving district for shopping and dining. For food and drinks, Monarch, Delano Barbecue Company and Ruben's Mexican Grill are worth a try. Other notables include Bohemia Healing Spa, Hatman Jack's Wichita Hat Works and Bungalow 26.

In the Douglas Design District, visitors find more than 300 locally owned and diverse businesses with an emphasis on design. It also is home to Frank Lloyd Wright's Allen House Museum and Study Center. Clifton Square, within the district, has unique Victorian-era homes and a village of shops and eateries.

TO REGISTER FOR THE 2022 SMALL
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WICHITA, KANSAS, OCTOBER 2-4, GO TO

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MEETING LEADERS

SUSAN SHAFFETTE



“This is heartstring work. My favorite part of what I do is developing relationships with people who are doing such important work for families and children.”

BY REBECCA TREON

When people think of meeting and event planners, swanky hotels and glitzy events often come to mind. But meeting planning is usually far from glamorous, and in many sectors, like non-profit and government agencies, planners must have specialized skills and training.

“It’s a totally different animal — it requires an extra level of work, which is why I and everyone I hire are CGMP [Certified Government Meeting Professional] trained,” Susan Shaffette, CEO and president of Team Dynamics, a Louisiana-based meeting planning agency, said about planning government meetings. “There are lots of details other meeting and event planners don’t have to consider, such as working on a government per diem rate and budget, or that people need to be seated according to the rank they hold.”

Shaffette came into her role by accident. While doing the accounting and database management for a nonprofit organization as a contractor, she was tasked with coordinating the annual meeting. It was her first experience handling all the particulars — from breakout rooms to catering — needed for a successful meeting. She realized the nonprofit and government events were a niche that required planners who could organize events within required parameters. She founded Team Dynamics in 2009 to handle meeting planning for that niche.

Today Shaffette has a staff of 20 who work remotely across the country. Her client roster includes government entities like the Louisiana Supreme Court and child welfare services, along with People First of Louisiana, which serves people with disabilities, and many other

groups that focus on social welfare issues. She has produced the Together We Can Conference for 20 years, gathering social workers, judges, educational leaders, foster parents and others who work with abused and neglected children.

“This is heartstring work,” Shaffette said. “My favorite part of what I do is developing relationships with people who are doing such important work for families and children.” Shaffette brings her professional network and creativity to bear for many government agency clients, such as the National Indian and Native American WIC Coalition.

“We helped organize their biannual event and became their support team,” she said. “Where many of these events had been organized and run by volunteers in the past, they already have a job that is not organizing a national conference. And because we are fast and professional — this is our area of expertise — we improved things, and it was the first time the event had been in the black.” While much of the work she does is to help organize people who deal with fairly extreme situations and heavy subjects, Shaffette makes a point of creating activities that are fun and designed to forge connections.

“We deal with some seriously intense topics, so we plan an evening event where everyone goes to Acadian Village for Cajun food, dancing and Zydeco music — everyone can relax and refresh themselves,” Shaffette said. “Many times the attendees are working on opposite sides, like a parent advocate and a public defender representing children. You have a whole lot of people trying to do the right thing and they have good intentions, so it means so much when a client says it was perfect.”

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

NAME

Susan Shaffette

TITLE

CEO/President

ORGANIZATION

Team Dynamics

LOCATION

Mandeville, Louisiana

BIRTHPLACE

St. Paul, Minnesota

EDUCATION

Associate of Arts in Accounting

CAREER HISTORY

- Freelance accounting, event planning and conference management, 1989-2002
- Nonprofit community work following Hurricane Katrina in 2005
- Founded Team Dynamics in 2009



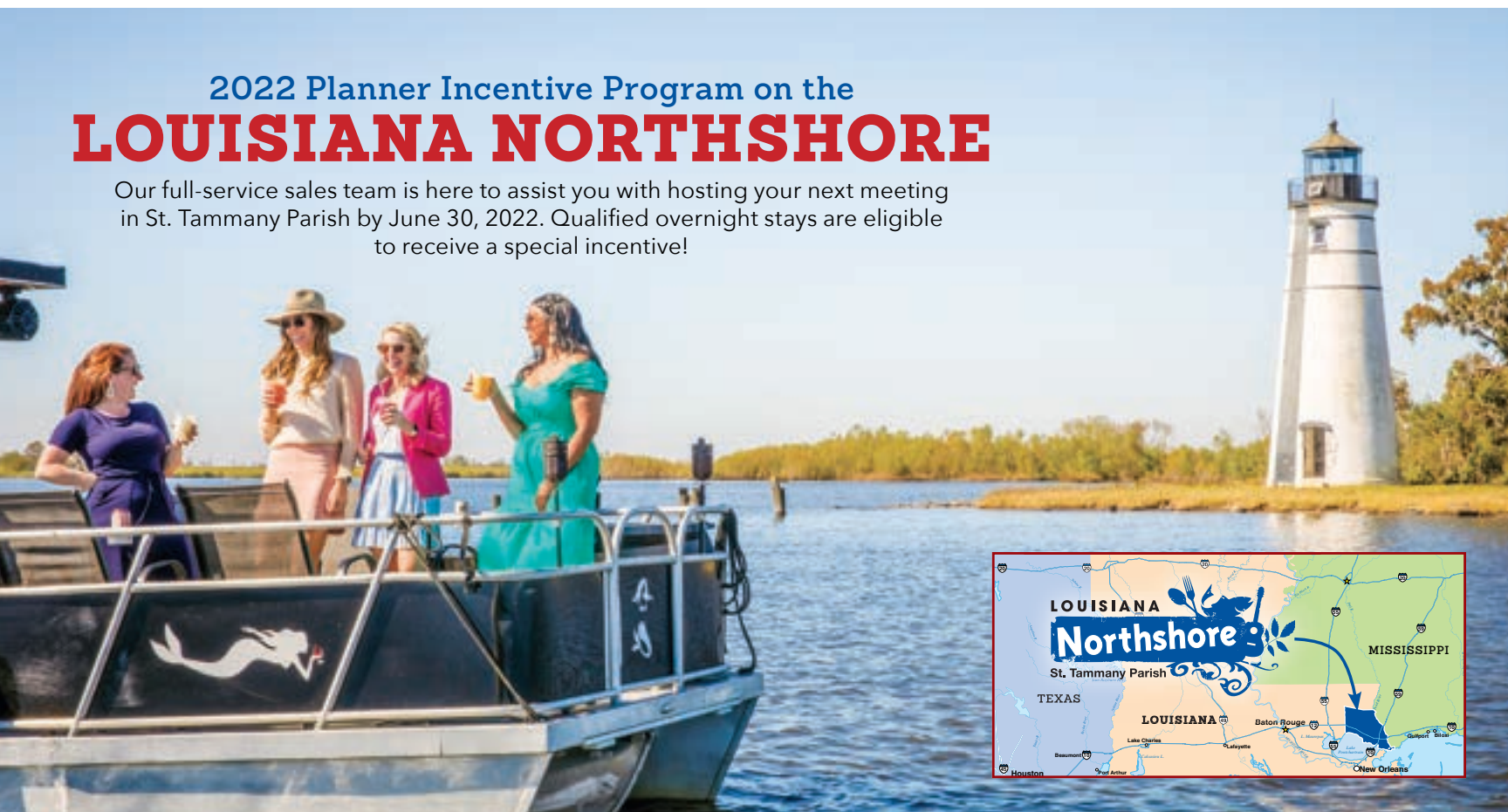
SUSAN SHAFFETTE AND HER HUSBAND, JAMES, ENJOY A SUNSET CRUISE ON THE BETSY ANN RIVERBOAT IN BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI.

TIPS FROM SUSAN SHAFFETTE

- Always use the CVB contacts at your meeting destination — they know their meeting spaces very well and can help through resources, RFP distribution and filtering, and fun options.
- Reach out to your SGMP chapter if you work with government funds and get certified as a CGMP. You learn so much about government meetings and regulations.
- Remember to have fun! Add a day onto each location and explore. Can you really say you have been somewhere if all you did was stay in the hotel?

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Increasing Value

EXPERTS SHARE INSIGHTS ON MAKING MEETINGS WORTHWHILE FOR ATTENDEES

BY RACHEL CRICK

A successful meeting is a fruitful meeting. Traditionally, this means stakeholders and organizers get a good return on investment and achieve their objectives. However, it's equally important that a meeting or event be of value to those taking time out of their busy schedules to attend. To keep attendees satisfied and excited about events to come, they need to get the most out of their experience at an event.

Although meetings differ in terms of themes and objectives, there are overall strategies planners can use to deliver the most value to attendees. Here are some tactics event planning experts use.

LET THE ATTENDEES DECIDE

No two meetings, conferences or events are attended by exactly the same group, so what's valuable to the attendees will change every time. So, the best way for a planner to ensure they're delivering the most value at every event is to let attendees decide what's important to them.

"You can create a conference on the fly, that basically, the attendees build themselves out of what they want and need and resources in the room," said Adrian Segar, consultant, meeting facilitator and author of "Conferences that Work: Creating Events that People Love."

Segar's process is all about letting the attendees figure out what they want to do and discuss it in real time. This involves creating an event that's flexible instead of fixed, which allows each conference to be tailored to the needs of those particular attendees.

In addition to choosing what is discussed, Tess Vismale, founder and CEO of iSocialExecution, an event rescue and execution firm, said attendees should be able to choose how their content is delivered. In a time of Zoom fatigue, burnout and reduced attention spans, this is especially important. It could include reducing the length of sessions, delivering more impactful

On defining attendee value:
"It is understanding what their needs are and trying to meet those needs."



Tonya Almond

**FORMER VICE PRESIDENT OF
EXPERIENCE DESIGN**

PCMA

Experience: 27 years

**On delivering attendee value:
“It should be putting that
passport in that attendee’s hand
and allowing them to create
and navigate and choose how
they want to receive content
from you.”**



Tess Vismale

FOUNDER AND CEO

iSocialExecution

Experience: 30 years

content in smaller bites, adding extra breaks or ensuring the content is accessible in multiple ways.

Vismale encourages planners and facilitators to ask the question: “What kinds of things are you doing to make your content a good experience for all?”

Getting to know attendees up front allows planners to consider their unique needs in the event-designing process. Learning more about attendees can be as simple as asking questions about their learning styles or personalities during registration.

“You have to listen to your audience,” said Tonya Almond, former vice president of knowledge and experience design for the Professional Convention Management Association.

FOSTER CONNECTIONS

Making connections is one of the most important aspects of any meeting or conference. When attendees connect, delivery of the event’s main messages improves and a conference becomes a more enjoyable and personable experience for all.

Traditional meetings and conferences often involve a lecture-style format, but having sessions where attendees can communicate and interact with each other has far more impact. In addition to serving as an icebreaker and making attendees more comfortable, it makes them active participants instead of passive listeners.

One way to help attendees make connections is by identifying what participants have in common with one another. It can be as simple as having a group break into smaller groups based on where they live. Or, provide prompts and have people discuss their answers in small groups. No matter how it’s done, facilitating conversations among attendees is a surefire way to foster a sense of closeness within the group and make the event a positive, memorable experience for them.

“You build a community at a conference, and that’s of tremendous value to attendees,” Segar said.

Meeting new people also allows attendees to expand their business or personal network. People want to make new connections so they can exchange ideas and collaborate.

“There’s so much you can learn from that peer-to-peer knowledge exchange,” said Almond.

The connections don’t have to be confined to the meeting or conference sessions; breaks are also an ideal time to connect with others, which is another reason why they’re important.

HARNESS EMOTION

The term return on investment is a well-known marker that’s used to determine how successful an event is in the eyes of stakeholders and organizers, but it doesn’t do a good job of measuring how successful the event was for attendees. This is where return on emotion, or ROE, a term that’s gaining ground in the planning and marketing world, comes in handy, according to Vismale.

ROE is used to describe how certain emotions make an event stand out to those who attend it. These emotions are hopeful, adventurous, active, accepted and motivated. So, invoking these emotions in attendees is an excellent way to ensure the event is valuable to them.

“People come together and want to be inspired,” said Almond.

Some of the emotions are easier to channel than others. Motivation is one example. A planner can select a keynote speaker or message to make attendees feel hopeful or inspired to make changes in their careers or lives. And there are ways for planners to incorporate each of these emotions into their event at every step. For instance, promoting audience engagement or choosing activities that require participation might make them feel active, while structuring the event in a way that encourages peer-to-peer interaction may help them feel accepted.

While incorporating certain emotions will make events valuable, taking steps to eliminate other feelings, such as stress or boredom, may be equally important. Today’s world is fraught

**On defining attendee value:
“Attendees have to define
what’s of value to them, and
they have to do it in real time,
at the meeting.”**



Adrian Segar

FOUNDER

**Conferences That Work, author, consultant
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with uncertainties and stressors. Addressing audience needs and being extra accommodating may cut back on anxiety. Likewise, making the event interactive could help alleviate boredom.

INVITE REFLECTION

When a meeting is nearing its end, taking a moment to pause and encourage attendees to reflect is a way to help them continue to benefit from the event.

Segar recommends hosting a couple of sessions near the end of the meeting that ask participants to think about what they learned and, more importantly, how they're going to use this information in their lives to reinforce their new knowledge. One of these sessions could be introspective, inviting participants to take stock of what they've learned about themselves. The other could be group collaboration to discuss new knowledge and brainstorm future endeavors. Asking attendees to assess their time at the meeting or conference in an honest and meaningful way helps them apply what they've learned and use it in their daily lives.

"If people go to a conference and nothing changes in their lives afterward then it wasn't successful," Segar said.

Reflection not only helps attendees reinforce the event's value, it can also help planners evaluate their processes and prepare for the future.

Sending surveys, particularly surveys that assess an event's ROE, is an excellent way to have people reflect on the event and how it made them feel. Vismale said ROE surveys help event planners and strategists gain "a sense of what that participant journey should be."

"If people go to a conference and nothing changes in their lives afterward then it wasn't successful."

— Adrian Segar, *Conferences That Work*

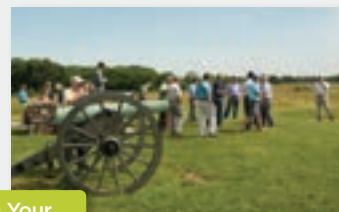
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Courtesy Black Hills Retreat

TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCES

These retreat centers are ideal for faith-based meetings

BY RACHEL CRICK

Sometimes the ideal meeting provides not just business opportunities but also spiritual encounters.

Religious and spiritual retreats offer a place for groups to connect with their faith and spirituality while getting away from the chaos of everyday life. These retreats offer the opportunity to experience nature, eat nutritious food, reflect and enjoy recreational activities, creating the

perfect setting for religious and spiritual meetings and events that are productive and fulfilling.

From New England beaches to Arizona deserts, these five religious retreats and conference centers offer beautiful settings to enjoy nature. And each provides groups a chance to relax, come together and strengthen relationships with their faith and each other.

BLACK HILLS RETREAT DEADWOOD, SOUTH DAKOTA

Set in the dense Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota, Black Hills Retreat is a member of the Christian Retreats Network, a nationwide system of Christian retreat and conference centers. Christian groups can enjoy 60 acres of picturesque forest land and a lake. The scenic and isolated location is perfect for focusing on faith while experiencing nature and making memories.

"When you think about taking your ministry to a retreat, and you really want that 'get away from it' feeling, you're going to get that there," said Ashley Haschemeyer, marketing manager at Christian Retreats Network.

Above: The Black Hills Retreat in Deadwood is set among 60 acres of picturesque South Dakota wilderness.



“When you think about taking your ministry to a retreat, and you really want that ‘get away from it’ feeling, you’re going to get that there.”

— Ashley Haschemeyer,
Christian Retreats Network

The retreat center accommodates up to 250 guests in lodges, guest cottages, cabins and dormitories with breakfast, lunch and dinner served buffet-style. Varied meeting spaces include the chapel, which seats 300, and several smaller conference rooms. The forest amphitheater overlooks the lake and is an excellent outdoor meeting or worship space for 50 people. Groups can go hiking, play disc golf, zip line, rock climb, enjoy the water or do team-building exercises. Indoors, there are billiards, foosball and board games.

blackhillsretreat.org

SPIRIT IN THE DESERT CAREFREE, ARIZONA

Spirit in the Desert offers guests a chance to enjoy the Sonoran Desert, wildlife and mountain views of Carefree, Arizona. While this retreat center has a spiritual emphasis, it doesn’t cater to one specific religion or denomination; rather, it allows each group



Photos courtesy Spirit in the Desert

Groups meeting at Spirit in the Desert can immerse themselves in the beauty of the striking Arizona landscape.

IDEAS



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or individual to define spirituality for themselves and welcomes all definitions. It's a distinct setting where any spiritual group can unplug and come together for relaxation and renewal.

"With our weather being so nice, there's a lot of outdoor emphasis," said Eric Simonson, the executive director.

Outdoor spaces, like hiking trails, a heated pool and spa, a labyrinth and meditation walking paths, allow groups to gather or individuals to explore in their own time. The facility offers hotel-style lodging for up to 50 guests and dining for up to 75, with meals served cafeteria-style. The seven meeting spaces, which include a chapel and small conference rooms, have audiovisual capabilities and can accommodate groups ranging from five to 90 people. Groups are invited to join any activities hosted by Spirit in the Desert, which range from nature hikes to cruises on Saguaro Lake.

spiritinthedesert.org

MERCY BY THE SEA RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTER IN CONNECTICUT



Courtesy Mercy by the Sea



PLEIN AIR PAINTING ON THE ATLANTIC AT MERCY BY THE SEA

Courtesy Mercy by the Sea

MERCY BY THE SEA RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTER

MADISON, CONNECTICUT

Owned by the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic organization, Mercy by the Sea is on the shores of Connecticut's Long Island Sound. One of the center's most notable features is its serene private beach, which offers visitors a stunning view of the water. This retreat center's mission is providing inclusivity in a naturally beautiful and peaceful setting to encourage reflection and growth, regardless of faith.

"We're very keen to try and let people know that anybody is welcome," said Amanda Patrick, the center's director of communications and marketing.

In addition to its private beach and 33 acres of grounds and gardens, Mercy by the Sea has overnight lodging for up to 54 guests. The property's meeting spaces include two auditoriums, several conference rooms and a solarium. Group can also meet or have events on the beach or grounds. Three meals and a snack are provided daily, and each is made using

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fresh, local foods whenever possible, including seasonal produce from the property's gardens. The center can handle up to 100 guests at a banquet. Retreat guests may also attend events and workshops held at the retreat center on topics such as art, spirituality, contemplative practices or eco-consciousness.

mercybythesea.org

“We’re very keen to try and let people know that anybody is welcome.”

— Amanda Patrick,
Mercy by the Sea Retreat and Conference Center

CARSON SPRINGS BAPTIST CONFERENCE CENTER

NEWPORT, TENNESSEE

Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center has been in operation since 1949. Located in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, 30 minutes from Gatlinburg, it began as a youth camp. In 2000, a conference center was added to provide the same spiritual benefits to adults. Its mountainous location, with dense forests and a creek, provide a beautiful backdrop for religious meetings and events, its remote location ensures relaxation and few distractions.

“You don't have to worry about the world getting in and bothering you too much,” said Susan Mason, ministry assistant at Carson Springs.

The Carson Springs lodge's large meeting room seats up to 250 people and can be configured into smaller meeting spaces. The Stokely Chapel, which seats up to 400, has full audiovisual capa-



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Pictured: Dive with the Coral Restoration Foundation, as they replant and restore coral reefs in the Florida Keys.

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bilities. The center offers varied lodging for groups of all sizes. There are 36 hotel rooms as well as 400 bunk beds for larger groups and youth retreats. Buffet-style meals are served, but plated meals can also be arranged in advance. Carson Springs also offers a variety of outdoor activities for groups to enjoy, such as nature hikes, a climbing wall and paintball.

tnbaptistcamps.org/carson-springs

“You don't have to worry about the world getting in and bothering you too much.”

— Susan Mason,
Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center

CHRISTIAN RETREAT CONFERENCE CENTER

BRADENTON, FLORIDA

Founded in 1968 by Gerald Derstine, Christian Retreat Conference Center has operated as a non-denominational Christian conference center for more than 50 years. On 110 acres along the Manatee River, it allows guests to enjoy the warm Florida climate and waterfront views. In addition to encouraging visitors to have fun in the sun, the retreat center provides plenty of opportunities for relaxation and deepening one's spirituality.

“People say they feel the presence of God here; they feel a peace they don't feel other places,” said Joanne Derstine Curphey, director of communications.

Christian Retreat is a good choice for groups and conferences of many sizes, with its Tabernacle

Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center features rustic facilities surrounded by the beauty of Tennessee's Smoky Mountains.



Photos courtesy Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center

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seating up to 1,000 people. Other auditoriums and boardrooms are ideal for smaller events. The 95 recently renovated guest rooms offer overnight lodging with a sense of luxury. The center works closely with groups to accommodate whatever dining needs they may have, including plated meals. Christian Retreat has both indoor and outdoor recreational facilities and activities, including a gymnasium, a tennis court, a swimming pool and canoeing on the river. Groups are invited to attend services at The Family Church, the retreat's accompanying ministry, held twice a week at the center.

christianretreat.org

“People say they feel the presence of God here; they feel a peace they don't feel other places.”

— Joanne Derstine Curphey,
Christian Retreat Conference Center

On 110 acres along the Manatee River in Bradenton, the Christian Retreat Conference Center can host gatherings of up to 1,000 people.



Photos courtesy Christian Retreat Conference Center



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Empire State CAPITAL

Public art is a highlight of Albany's
Empire State Plaza.

All photos courtesy Discover Albany

Albany has four centuries of Upstate meetings experience

BY ELIZABETH HEY

Albany, New York, is a meetings destination 400 years in the making.

In recent years, Albany's bustling downtown along the Hudson River and its booming, uptown tech corridor have spurred the growth of hotels, restaurants and venues. But more than four centuries of history remain evident in its architecture, attractions and landmark businesses.

The Erie Canal officially began in Albany, and the recently completed Empire State Trail parallels the canal route. In 1780, at the home that is now the Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, Alexander Hamilton wed Eliza Schuyler, the daughter of a wealthy and prominent New York family. Interest in Hamilton's ties to Albany was reignited with the Broadway hit musical "Hamilton."

ALBANY AT A GLANCE

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EXHIBIT SPACE: 52,000 square feet

OTHER MEETING SPACES: 7 total rooms

MEETING HOTELS

Renaissance Albany

GUEST ROOMS: 209

MEETING SPACE: 8,000 square feet

Crowne Plaza Albany – The Desmond Albany

GUEST ROOMS: 322

MEETING SPACE: 24,000 square feet

Albany Marriott

GUEST ROOMS: 356

MEETING SPACE: 28,000 square feet

WHO'S MEETING IN ALBANY

NYS Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus

ATTENDEES: 3,000

U.S. Figure Skating, Synchronized Skating

Eastern Regionals

ATTENDEES: 2,000

NYS Brewers Association Annual Craft

Brewers Conference

ATTENDEES: 500



Destination Highlights

Albany's Dutch roots intermingle with its English heritage. The city's oldest buildings harken to the Dutch era, especially at Quackenbush Square. As the city evolved, English architecture became more prevalent.

"The oldest operational building in Albany is The Olde English Pub that's next door to our visitors center," said Jay Cloutier, director of sales for Discover Albany. "It has a beautiful garden and specializes in English food and beer with indoor and outdoor seating."

Outstanding cultural attractions include world-class museums. The New York State Museum showcases pioneers in numerous scientific disciplines, displaying more than 16 million specimens, objects and artifacts. The Albany Institute of History and Art, founded in 1791, is the oldest museum in New York and the second oldest in the nation. Built in 1931, the ornate, 2,800-seat Palace Theatre is home to the Albany Symphony Orchestra, ballet, concerts, Broadway productions and more.

The Capital Complex and Albany Capital Center are within the city's walkable downtown. Creating a signature skyline, the Egg Center for the Performing Arts contains two theaters and an outdoor summer stage. The Empire State Plaza serves as an outdoor community gathering space. Visitors can catch a bird's-eye view of the city from the Plaza's Corning Tower Observation Deck.

"Below the outdoor gathering space is the Empire State Plaza Concourse, which connects numerous buildings and showcases the largest modern art exhibit in the country," said Cloutier. "The nearby New York State Capitol is a marvel and has been restored to its original grandeur."

Distinctive Venues

Many of the city's historic spaces are available for after-hours events, receptions and meals. Downtown, Cornerstone at the Plaza is at the base of The Egg on the Empire State Plaza. Its floor-to-ceiling windows provide 360-degree views for catered events of up to 250 guests. Newly restored, the Kenmore Ballroom was once the site of the Rain-Bo Room, a nightclub that broadcast music on one of the nation's first radio stations. The venue boasts a stage and double staircase leading to its multi-level ballroom, which seats 300 for dinner or 500 guests for a reception.

The Albany Institute of History and Art is famous for its collection of Hudson River School paintings and is the second-oldest museum in the nation. Its indoor and outdoor spaces can handle up to 200 guests. The New York State Museum's fourth-floor indoor terrace gallery has panoramic views of the city. The museum accommodates 200 for banquets and up to 400 in two theaters and has several meeting rooms.

Outside the city limits, beautiful grounds and historic buildings surround the Shaker Heritage Barn at Shaker Heritage Society, America's first Shaker settlement. Groups must provide their own catering at the barn. Several nearby historic homes offer guided tours, meals and receptions, including the 1830s Pruyn House, which sits on five acres with lovely gardens and hosts dinners a rustic barn.



Shaker Heritage Barn

DISTINCTIVE VENUES

Major Meeting Spaces

As the nation's oldest continuously chartered city, Albany has hosted meetings since 1609. The Capital Complex is notable for its variety of venues, all connected by glass-enclosed walkways above street level. As the largest meeting space in upstate New York, the complex spans 159,000 square feet. Large events are held at the Albany Capital Center, where state-of-the-art meeting and convention space accommodates from 10 to 5,000 attendees and on-site parking is available.

"The Albany Capital Center has the latest technology for maintaining indoor air quality and is modern in all regards with fantastic internet speeds and unique lighting, where logos or images can be projected onto the ceiling," said Cloutier. "They've put a lot of thought into how the building can be uniquely tailored for every event."

The Empire State Plaza Convention Center can host up to 1,500 people in its underground facility, which includes parking — all attached to the New York State Museum and the state capitol building. MVP Arena, one of the Northeast's premier sports and special events arenas, can seat from 6,000 to 17,000 people. The Egg's two theaters seat just under 500 and 1,000 respectively, and there is also tradeshow space.

Hotels include the elegant Renaissance Albany Hotel, which is connected to the Albany Capital Center; the Marriott Albany; the newly renovated Crowne Plaza Albany—The Desmond Hotel; and the full-service Hilton Albany.



MAJOR MEETING SPACES

Albany Capital Center

After the Meeting

After hours, attendees can hop aboard a Dutch Apple Cruise that highlights the city's historic connection to the Hudson River. Options include a full bar, gourmet meals and entertainment with a recommended maximum of 120 passengers for catered events. Attendees can also strike out on their own on the self-guided #CapitalWalls-Murals tour, a public art project dispersed throughout downtown.

Craft beverages continue to flow throughout the Capital Region, and a passport program offers a map for exploration and rewards for visits. The Historic Downtown Albany Food Tour features tastes and sips from downtown restaurants punctuated by historic fun facts about the city. Taste of Troy Food Tours can customize private outings for groups of eight to 120 guests and create a VIP experience.

"Our craft beverage trail reveals the unique personalities of the city," said Cloutier. "Each stop reflects the creative personality of the brewer. Some honor our Dutch heritage and others reflect the diverse communities that came into Albany after the Dutch, including the English and German beers."

Beyond the city, the Helderberg Hilltowns of Berne, Knox, Rensselaerville and Westerlo perch atop the Helderberg Escarpment. Nearby John Boyd Thacher State Park boasts an extensive trail network including the Indian Ladder Trail, dotted with waterfalls and panoramic views of the Hudson-Mohawk Valleys and the Adirondack and Green mountains. Attendees can navigate WildPlay Element Park's adventure course for an exhilarating teambuilding activity.



AFTER HOURS

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AFTER HOURS

Rensselaerville in the Helderberg Hilltowns



AFTER HOURS

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Oxford's

MEETING MYSTIQUE

BY TOM ADKINSON

Where the last vestiges of the Appalachian Mountains taper away in northern Mississippi, there sits Oxford — pleasantly hilly, home to a major university, shrouded in the mystique of a great American novelist and perpetually hospitable.

Oxford's resident population is only about 25,000, but it basically doubles in size when students at the University of Mississippi appear, and it grows even larger on an SEC football weekend when Vaught-Hemingway Stadium fills to its 64,038 capacity. Even a baseball game can draw 10,000 fans.

Oxford becomes a pilgrimage destination during football season, especially a 10-acre parcel on campus called the Grove. The socializing and good times at the Grove — which fills with tents and tables and adult beverages — are as big of an attraction for some people as the teams playing at the stadium.


Locals say that a miracle occurs overnight after the games because the Grove is pristine the next day, waiting for students and visitors to stroll in the shade, have a quiet conversation on a bench or admire the campus architecture, particularly the Lyceum, an academic building that now houses university administrative offices.

Oxford is easy for meeting planners to explore and even easier for attendees to enjoy.



A GROUP TASTING AT
WONDERBIRD SPIRITS

All photos courtesy Visit Oxford



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CONTACT INFO
Visit Oxford, Mississippi
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visitoxfordms.com

Where to Meet

The Square, with the 1872 Lafayette County Courthouse at its center, is the hub of non-campus activity, and meeting planners' binary choice is whether to meet within walking distance of the Square or just a few minutes' drive away.

The 136-room Graduate Oxford, among the first in the Graduate hotel collection, and the 38-room boutique Chancellor's House are at the Square, while the 146-room Inn at Ole Miss and the 121-room Marriott Courtyard are a short walk away. Each has meeting space commensurate with its size.

The city-owned 11,000-square-foot Oxford Conference Center, two miles east of the Square, has three hotels adjacent to it — Hampton Inn, Tru by Hilton and Town Place — for a combined 287 guest rooms. Conference center sales manager Dana Faggert, noting that some meetings use one hotel near the conference center and one at the Square, explains just how accessible her facility is to the rest of Oxford: "If it takes me more than 10 minutes to get anywhere, I think traffic is heavy."

Where to Eat

Meeting planners do their attendees a favor by turning them loose for a dine-around saying, "You can't go wrong." Almost four dozen restaurants, bistros and specialty food purveyors are on or near the Square — and there's not a franchise in sight — with another 80 or more restaurants elsewhere in town. A foundational figure in Oxford's culinary reputation is Chef John Currence, a James Beard Award winner and "Top Chef" competitor, who has four restaurants.

"Visitors are amazed at the variety and quantity of our food offerings," said Kinney Ferris, executive director of Visit Oxford. Downtown, try a Currence property (City Grocery or Snackbar), go Greek at Volta, sample Southern fare at the Ajax Diner, get protein at the Oxford Grillehouse, relax in the bistro atmosphere at Saint Leo or enjoy pizza and live music at Proud Larry's.

Where to Play Indoors

Venues for off-site functions are diverse. Just off the Square is the Lyric Oxford, a popular live music venue in what was once a stable owned by novelist William Faulkner's family. It has a stage but no permanent seats, so it is very adaptable for functions, according to Lindsay Dillon-Maginnis, the Lyric's head of production.

The Powerhouse began as, well, a powerhouse that supplied Oxford's electricity. It is an event space now, with two 40-by-70-foot rooms with 24-foot ceilings and exposed brick walls. It's also home to the Yoknapatawpha — more Faulkner influence — Arts Council.

Black history is the focus of the Burns-Belfry Museum. The distinctive red-brick building just off the Square was built in 1910 by a post-Civil War Methodist Episcopal congregation organized by citizens who were former slaves. Its exhibits detail landmarks from the war through the 1960s civil rights movement. If you book the space, ask how author John Grisham played a role in the museum's preservation.

Oxford

Where to Go Special

Tapping into Oxford's literary heritage is easy. First and foremost is visiting Rowan Oak, William Faulkner's home. Hardy visitors can walk a half-mile trail from the University of Mississippi Museum, but groups usually drive up to the modified Greek Revival house. Explore upstairs and downstairs, see Faulkner's typewriter, inspect movie memorabilia from his screenwriting days and ponder his work style by inspecting the outline of "A Fable," which he scribbled on the wall of his office/writing room.

A pilgrimage site for literature lovers, Square Books (yep, it's on the Square) is famous for author events, its quantity of books that focus on Mississippi and the South, and its casual hospitality. A cafe sits between the history and fiction sections, and you're welcome to enjoy a tea or cappuccino and a book on the store's 90-foot-long balcony. Around the corner on the Square is another retail landmark, Neilson's, Mississippi's oldest department store.

If your meeting doesn't include a scheduled visit to the Ole Miss campus, find time before leaving Oxford to contemplate the statue of James Meredith. Military veteran Meredith integrated Ole Miss in 1962 in what was one of the most important events in the civil rights movement. The university's Civil Rights Memorial, unveiled in 2006, honors Meredith and those who fought for all citizens to have equal educational opportunities in the South. A marker on the Mississippi Freedom Trail is nearby.



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Courtesy Plaza Theatre

BY PAULA AVEN GLADYCH

In a state as legendary as Texas, there's no shortage of memorable places to meet.

Meeting planners interested in taking their Texas meetings and conferences to a different level should consider hosting events at these five Texas venues: a three-story European-style food hall, a historic downtown theater, a tropical island resort, a performing arts center in an old courthouse and a famous Route 66 landmark with a worldwide reputation.

PLAZA THEATRE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

El Paso

Built in 1930 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, El Paso's historic Plaza Theatre has beautifully painted ceilings, mosaic-tile floors, deco-

rative metal railings and a Mighty Wurlitzer Blaban III Organ, with 1,071 pipes that can simulate 15 different instruments. One of a handful of so-called atmospheric theaters left in the country, the theater's design and painted flourishes make audience members feel like they are sitting in a lovely Spanish courtyard instead of in an enclosed theater.

After sitting vacant for 30 years, the theater was restored to its original splendor in 2006 with all the bells and whistles that make a good Broadway-style theater. The Kendall Kidd Performance Hall has 2,050 seats and is large enough to stage a large touring Broadway musical. It also makes a great spot for lectures, opening sessions and movie screenings.

The Philanthropy Theatre, above the main theater on the third level, can host groups of 200. The rooftop Alcantar Sky Garden is a beautiful outdoor space for receptions, mixers or ice-breakers of up to 130 people. Arts Festival Plaza, located between the Plaza Theatre and the El Paso Museum of Art, is another outdoor event space for larger groups.

elpasolive.com

THE BOX GARDEN AT PLANO'S LEGACY HALL



Courtesy Legacy Hall

LEGACY HALL

Plano

Legacy Hall in Plano, one of the largest food halls in the country, features restaurants and food stalls curated by some of the city's best chefs. The three-story, 55,000-square-foot European-style food hall, brewery and live music and entertainment venue is in Plano's Legacy West development.

The full venue can accommodate up to 2,500 people and can be arranged to meet a group's specific needs, whether it is live entertainment, bar packages or catering from any of the 20 eateries, with menus that include sushi, ramen, Indian food, barbecue and lobster rolls.

A covered second-floor terrace above the Box Garden entertainment venue and stage can host groups up to 200 people. Inside, the second floor can accommodate gatherings of up to 500. The third-floor bar is an industrial space embedded within a working brewery and includes its own private bar, German brat eatery and a terrace that overlooks the live music venue. It can accommodate up to 200 people.

The Box Garden has an entertainment stage, 24-foot LED screen, patio seating and a private bar for events up to 800 people. Tonic Bar and Lounge, on the second floor, is a chic space for groups of 30 to 120 that can serve as an indoor/outdoor space when the spacious patio doors are open wide on a beautiful day.

legacyfoodhall.com

THE BIG TEXAN STEAK RANCH AND STARLIGHT RANCH EVENT CENTER

Amarillo

Most people have heard of The Big Texan Steak Ranch, an Amarillo fixture on Route 66 since 1960. Its 72-ounce steak challenge is legendary and has attracted thousands of diners over the years. Challengers must eat a shrimp cocktail, baked potato, salad with roll, and a 72-ounce steak in an hour to get their meal free. Those who can't finish the meal must pay full price.

In the past, groups could rent the restaurant for events, but it has gotten too busy for that. A couple of smaller rooms can be rented out in the restaurant, but to accommodate larger groups, the restaurant's owners bought an abandoned water park less than a half mile from the restaurant and converted it into the Starlight Ranch Event Center.

The facility has a stage and space for concerts, special events, trade shows or company picnics for up to 5,000. An 18-hole miniature golf course is only open during concerts and events. In pre-COVID times, a vendor operated zip lines, and the owners hope to bring that back. Smaller events can take over the facility's individual pavilions, with catering by The Big Texan. Larger groups can bring in food trucks or other caterers.

An 8,000-square-foot indoor facility is being built on property that could be available for rentals mid- to late 2022. The site also has a large RV park and a motel that is now an Airbnb.

bigtexan.com

THE BIG TEXAN'S 72-OUNCE
STEAK CHALLENGE

Courtesy The Big Texan

ISLA GRAND BEACH RESORT

South Padre Island

The only tropical island in the state, South Padre Island is known as a major spring break and summer destination in Texas. With more than 34 miles of pristine beaches, most of its meeting venues have a great view of the bay or the Gulf of Mexico.

Among them is Isla Grand Beach Resort, a full-service resort on the beach in the southern part of the island, near all of the top attractions. It is a huge hit with attendees, thanks to 10 acres of tropical foliage and a long list of amenities: two swimming pools, hot tubs, tennis courts, sand volleyball courts, a nightclub, restaurants, an outdoor burger shack grill and a coffee shop.

From Memorial Day through Labor Day, there's live entertainment daily. Meeting planners have their pick of 10,000 square feet of meeting and convention space that can accommodate groups of 10 in the boardroom or receptions up to 860 in the 6,000-square-foot Grand Ballroom. There are 10 function rooms, and the ballroom, which can host banquets for 400, can be split into four rooms.

The resort is the largest meeting facility on the island, with 128 cabana rooms and 65 two-bedroom condos with views of the Gulf of Mexico. Every room has a private patio or balcony with beach or garden views.

islagrand.com



Courtesy Isla Grand Beach Resort



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MCKINNEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Courtesy McKinney Performing Arts Center

MCKINNEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

McKinney

The McKinney Performing Arts Center is a multi-purpose facility inside the city's historic Collin County Courthouse, built in the late 1800s. The theater, which seats 427 on the main floor and balcony, is inside the old courtroom and can be used for live entertainment, off-Broadway and comedy shows, concerts and private events.

Other areas of the courthouse work as breakout spaces, including the first-floor gallery, perfect for intimate banquets, cocktail receptions or art exhibits. The gallery space was once a vault, so it has a heavy vault door. Noble Hall, a more intimate space with lots of windows and hardwood floors, can handle 75 people theater-style, while Ruschhaupt Hall can host 130 theater-style or 80 for a banquet with a dance floor. The room can also be divided into two.

The center's staff can attend events to talk about the buildings history, which would include stories of Frank and Jessie James, who visited McKinney many times because they had a cousin who lived there. Because the building is historic, the original judge's bench and witness stands are behind the stage. Occasionally, the old courthouse is used for actual trials because it can accommodate larger audiences than the new courthouse, which opened in 1979.

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Texas College Towns

THE PATIO AT AQUABREW IS A POPULAR SPOT FOR SAN MARCOS VISITORS AND TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ALIKE.

Courtesy San Marcos CVB

Meeting Guide

BY PAULA AVEN GLADYCH

School spirit, like the state, is oversized in Texas, from sold-out stadiums for football games to amazing tailgating that inevitably includes thousands of fans who eat smoked brisket, pulled pork, chicken and ribs as they toast their favorite teams.

Meeting planners hosting events in these Texas college towns can incorporate some of that game-day excitement into their events, from tours of campus to visits by famous team mascots.

SAN MARCOS

The city of San Marcos has an incredible relationship with Texas State University and hosts many large conferences and events on campus. Groups that want to add a bit of university flair can have the school's nationally known mariachi group perform or the school's

ROTC program present the colors at opening sessions.

The LBJ Student Center has two large ballrooms, one that can host 336 people at rounds and another that can seat 408 for a banquet. Several smaller rooms handle breakout sessions. The university also manages The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, at the headwaters of the San Marcos River. Smaller meeting groups can have an off-site reception there that includes a glass-bottom boat tour on Spring Lake.

One of the largest meeting venues in town is the Embassy Suites by Hilton San Marcos Hotel and Conference Center, with 283 two-room suites and more than 70,000 square feet of meeting space. The facility handles banquets for up to 2,300. The Holiday Inn San Marcos Convention Center is a smaller meeting property.

At Wonderworld Cave, attendees can tour the earthquake-formed cave and take in breathtaking views of the surrounding Texas Hill Country from its observation deck. A grassy area is large enough to have an event with food, live music or other entertainment.

visitsanmarcos.com

CALVARY COURT IN COLLEGE STATION



Courtesy City of College Station

DINING AT BORDER FOUNDRY IN LAREDO



Courtesy Laredo CVB

COLLEGE STATION

Home to the Texas A&M University Aggies, College Station is the consummate college town, with two entertainment districts and plenty of restaurants and bars. Meeting planners can tap into that university energy by bringing in A&M's Aggie Yell Leaders or the Aggie Wranglers country-western dance team to pump up the crowd. Another option? Scheduling a visit from Reveille X — an American rough-coat collie known as the First Lady of Aggieland and Texas A&M's official mascot — and her Corps of Cadets handler.

The city has 250,000 square feet of meeting space and more than 4,500 hotel rooms in 40 properties. Many top meeting spaces are on the A&M campus, as well as several full-service conference hotels. The Texas A&M Hotel and Conference Center, on campus near Kyle Field, has a banquet capacity of 800, and the Hilton College Station has more than 300 guest rooms and 25,000 square feet of meeting space. The George and Cavalry Court are boutique hotels that anchor the Century Square entertainment district near campus. Together, they have 303 guest rooms and nearly 12,000 square feet of meeting space.

Northgate is another large entertainment district for college students and alumni returning to relive their college days. Because of its deep-rooted sports history, the city is a major sports destination. The George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum is an elegant off-site meeting venue, and attendees will also want to explore the 12-acre Brazos Valley Veterans Memorial.

visit.cstx.gov

LAREDO

Laredo, which sits on the border with Mexico, is one of the oldest cities in the U.S. Its proximity to Mexico gives it a wealth of Tex-Mex cuisine. Located within a two-hour drive of Corpus Christi and San Antonio, and home to Texas A&M International University, the city has become a popular meeting destination.

The Laredo Convention and Visitors Bureau has a wonderful relationship with the university, and they work together to host major conferences and events. The university has plenty of meeting venues, including a large ballroom in the student activities center that can accommodate up to 800 people. The university also has a planetarium, where groups can host lectures or show 3D movies. Outdoor event spaces abound on campus, which make it possible to see some of the city's abundant wildlife, like white-tailed deer and javelinas.

Groups can host appearances by the university's cheerleading team or work with the university to bring in knowledgeable guest speakers to liven up their events.

About 1,000 of Laredo's 4,000 hotel rooms are in the entertainment district near the university. There is a stadium there, as well as several restaurants and bars.

Groups can book spaces in the stadium or in the clubhouse, with room for up to 400 people. The Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course clubhouse offers beautiful views of the river and Mexico, and the Laredo Center for the Arts and Border Heritage Museum also make special off-site venues.

visitlaredo.com

LUBBOCK

Groups meeting in Lubbock can soak up some college spirit by inviting guests like Raider Red, Texas Tech University's costumed mascot; the Masked Rider, who looks a lot like Zorro with his black hat and flowing cape; or the university's Spirit Squad. All appear free of charge.

In their free time, attendees can tour the university's athletic fields or the Texas Tech Public Art Collection, which was recently ranked in the top 10 outdoor museums in the nation by Fodor's Travel. Local attractions such as The Museum of Texas Tech University, National Ranching Heritage Center, Lubbock Lake Landmark and the Rawls Golf Course, an NCAA championship course, are all associated with the university and can be incorporated into a group's visit.

Texas Tech has several state-of-the-art meeting facilities, such as Jones AT&T Stadium/Texas Tech Club, which can host groups of 400, and United Supermarkets Arena, which has three meeting facilities, including the City Bank Conference Center, Club Red and Arena Concourse. The city's full-service hotels include the Cotton Court Hotel, designed to look like a 19th-century cotton gin; the MCM Elegante; Overton Hotel and Conference Center and DoubleTree by Hilton.

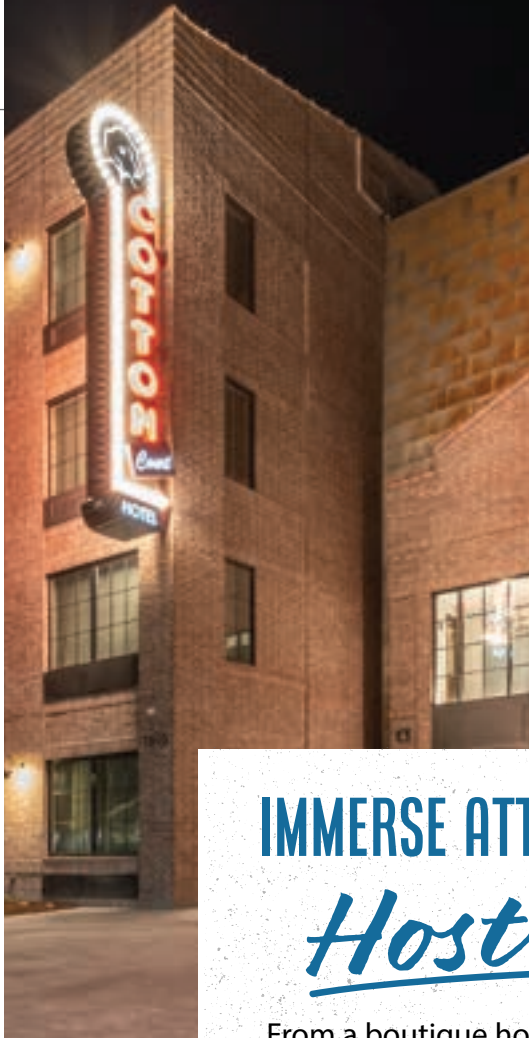
Off-site venues include the National Ranching Heritage Center, the Buddy Holly Hall of Performing Arts and Sciences and the American Windmill Museum.

visitolubbock.org

FORT WORTH

The home of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth wasn't always as civilized as it is now. Originally settled in 1849 as an army outpost along the Trinity River, Fort Worth was one of eight forts built to protect settlers from Native American attacks on the frontier. The cattle industry was king, with the historic Chisholm Trail winding its way through town.

Visitors to the city can tap into this historic cattle drive tradition daily in



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LUBBOCK



FORT WORTH STOCKYARDS



Courtesy Travel Texas

the city's Stockyards National Historic District. Every day, cowhands herd Texas longhorns through the streets of the district to the delight of the crowds. Meeting attendees interested in spending time in the city before or after their conference can visit Fort Worth Botanic Gardens, the Fort Worth Zoo and American Airlines C.R. Smith Museum. They also can tour TCU's campus, which is about three miles from downtown.

Meeting planners have their choice of meeting venues in the city, including the Fort Worth Convention Center, with 253,226 square feet of exhibit space and 58,849 square feet of flexible meeting space in the heart of downtown. First-class hotels, restaurants, shops, galleries and performance venues surround the center, and some of them make great off-site venues. The Will Rogers Memorial Center has a coliseum, auditorium, exhibit halls and equestrian facilities, while Dickies Arena is a multipurpose facility that can host concerts, graduation ceremonies, outdoor festivals and events.

There are more than 12,000 hotel rooms in the city, many located near downtown and the historic Stockyards.

fortworth.com



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