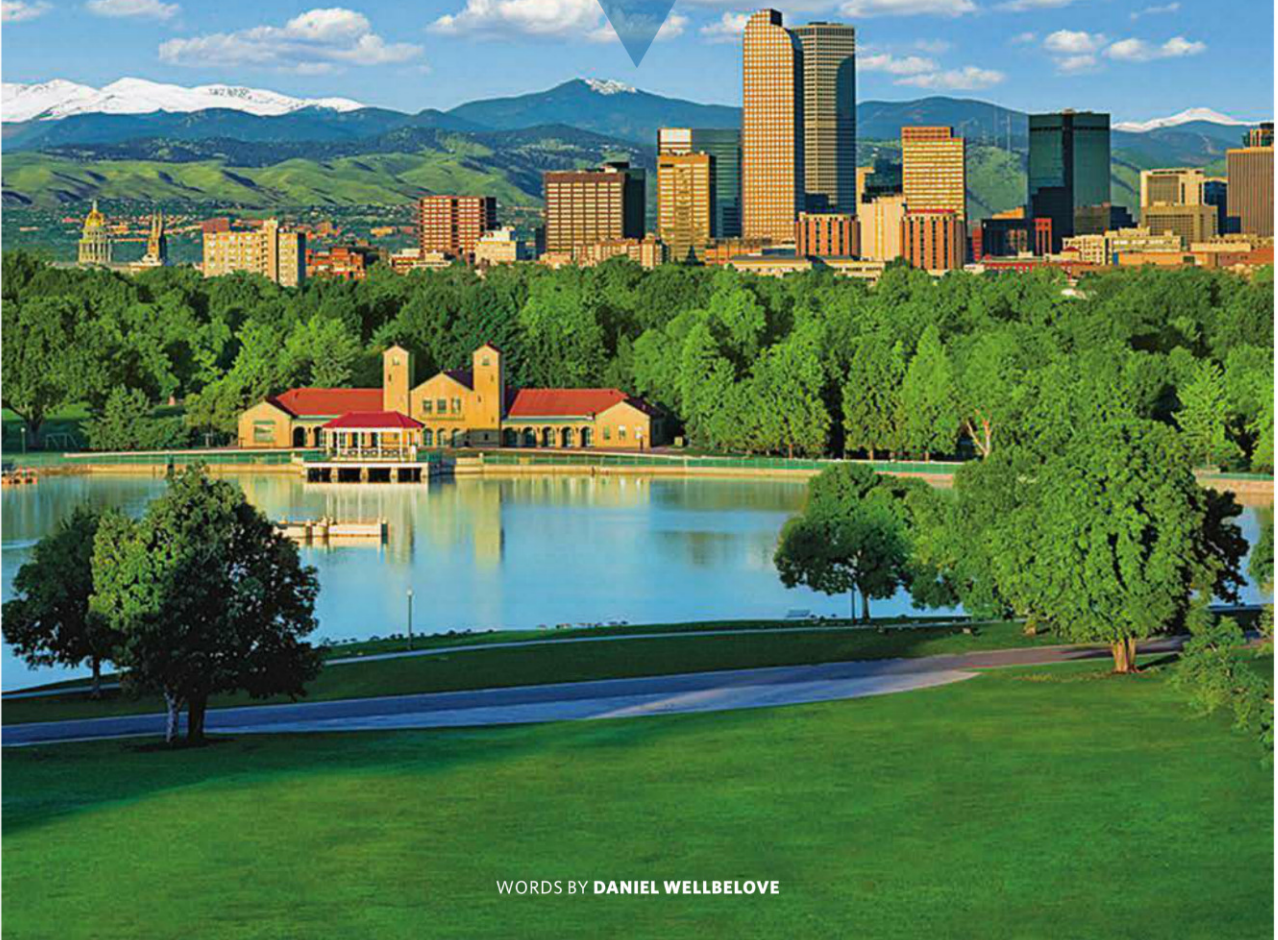


A HEMISPHERES SUPPLEMENT

# PLANNING YOUR PERFECT EVENT

From the West Coast to the East, and south of the border, a vast range of venues and organizations are there to make your meeting or convention a success



WORDS BY **DANIEL WELLBELOVE**





## AT THE HEART OF ITS SUCCESS IS A COMMUNITY THAT UNDERSTANDS THE VALUE OF CONVENTIONS

**Whether you're hosting 10 or 10,000 people**, it's important to make your event memorable, stress-free and, above all, successful. Lucky, then, that there are cities and one-of-a-kind venues all across the U.S. and Mexico that are willing to do all they can to make this happen.

High-rollers the world over know it as a premier leisure destination, but Las Vegas also ranks among America's favorite cities for events and conventions, with 5.1 million delegates converging for more than 22,000 meetings in 2013 alone, according to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. And with close to 150,000 hotel rooms within 20 minutes of three of the country's largest convention centers, there's a place to stay whatever your party's budget or demographic.

These include the 2,163 rooms and suites at the South Point Hotel, where an off-Strip location has allowed it to establish itself as a true convention hotel. "We're not in the middle of the glitz, glamour and distractions, which benefits convention groups as we offer lower prices and better food than the Strip,"

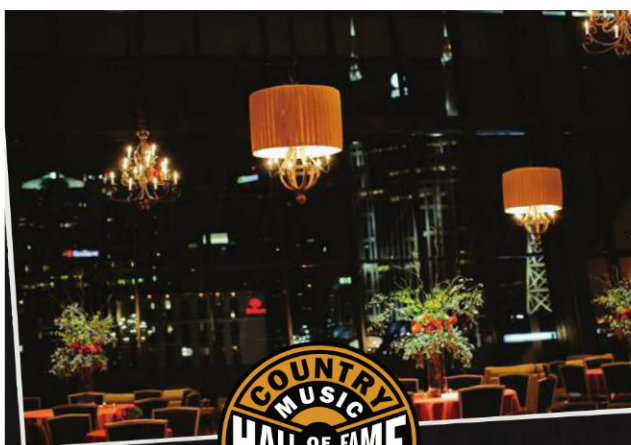
says director of sales Maureen Robinson. "And we still have everything everyone else has, plus a 64-lane bowling center, 11 restaurants, movie theater and 4,600-seat equestrian arena."

The South Point also boasts 175,000 square feet of function space, but its primary attraction is the ease and speed of service its staff can provide. "We have just one owner and no stockholders to answer to, which enables us to make quick decisions," says Robinson. "Our staff are empowered to give immediate answers, which is a freedom that many hotels can't offer."

At the base of the Rocky Mountains, in the center of the country, the accessible, green and pedestrian-friendly environs of the Mile High City have hosted such monumental events as the 2008 Democratic National Convention. At the heart of its success is a community that understands the value of conventions.

"We have a great collaboration between the business community and civic leaders, plus we've benefitted from a succession of entrepreneurial mayors,"





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IMAGE: SCOTT DRESSEL-MARTIN

## CHARLOTTE'S A CITY THAT'S DEFINITELY ON THE MOVE THANKS TO SMART DEVELOPMENT AND PLENTY OF AMENITIES

says Rachel Benedick, VP of sales and service at Visit Denver. This support was vital in the development of the city's outstanding event spaces—not least the expansion of the Colorado Convention Center, which ranks among the most practical and ecologically friendly facilities ever built.

Moving into the mountains, the Beaver Run Resort and Convention Center can also call on a close relationship with its local community—this time with the Victorian mining town of Breckenridge. “A successful event comes from utilizing all the assets unique to your location, and we’ve found that the ambiance of the old town really plays off well,” says Bruce Horii, the resort’s director of sales and marketing.

Beaver Run is sandwiched between the town and ski resort, meaning its guests can network on the slopes before attending one of the wide range of events across its 40,000 square feet of meeting rooms and decks. “The main thing is to find the needs of a group and work out how we can match the setting to that,” says Horii.

Jason McLaughlin, director of sales and marketing at the Five Diamond-rated Park Hyatt Aviara in San Diego, is also a firm advocate of embracing your destination and incorporating it into your event. But here, the focus shifts from ski to sun and surf, bringing with it a new range of unique experiences for guests: “We can organize a surf





Left and far left: Skiing and conventions in Colorado.  
Below: The grand ballroom at the Park Hyatt Aviara Resort



concierge to take a group to the beach and give them surf lessons, or arrange a welcome event involving animals from the city's world-famous zoo."

Beautiful views of the Pacific, 78,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space and a comfortably casual Southern California atmosphere have made the resort popular for everything from conferences to social occasions. "We've also had some incredible celebrity weddings that have taken advantage of our grounds and pools and one of the best climates in the country," says McLaughlin.

#### City stand-outs

"Charlotte's a city that's definitely on the move thanks to smart development and plenty of amenities, but it still hasn't lost the southern charm and hospitality that is truly a city signature," says Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority CEO Tom Murray. This combination has

enticed events as varied as the National Rifle Association Annual Meeting and the Shriners International Session, while its success in hosting the 2012 Democratic National Convention has shown the city can comfortably handle tens of thousands of attendees at any one time.

As a result, Charlotte is becoming a favorite destination for real estate and hotel developers, with cranes appearing on the city skyline with a renewed frequency. The light rail transit line is working on an expansion that will help capitalize on the runaway success that mode of transportation has seen in recent years.

"We're also working on a project that reinvents two 60-year-old public assembly buildings: Bojangles' Coliseum and Owens Auditorium," says Murray. When everything's complete, the city will be able to boast a new multi-purpose indoor venue between the

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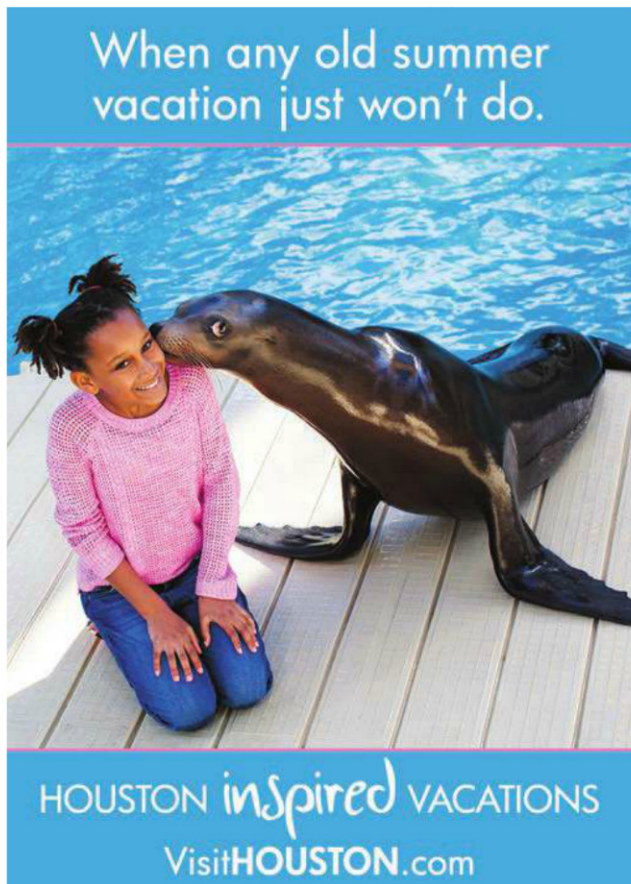
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existing structures with an onsite hotel.

As well as offering the excellent facilities and service required of any great convention city, Charlotte is committed to playing to its unique strengths, such as its renowned enthusiasm for motorsports. "With more than 90% of Sprint Cup teams based here, major races at Charlotte Motor Speedway, and the history and heritage found at the NASCAR Hall of Fame, we definitely take pride in that one-of-a-kind experience," says Murray.

Meanwhile, in Little Rock, a "don't say no, just figure it out" attitude is crucial to attracting new conference and event guests. That's according to Alan Sims, VP of sales and services at the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau: "We are one of only a few destinations that manages its own facility and that means we are able to meet some huge customer requests. You don't want to be a small fish in a big pond; here, we make everyone feel like the only fish."

Besides an excellent selection of flexible meeting spaces, which will only improve once the city completes its \$68 million-renovation of the historic Robinson Ballroom, the other feather in Little Rock's cap is a wonderful array of off-site attractions and museums that dwarves the offering of most cities its size—and all are easily accessible. As Sims says: "You can hold an event in many cities, but how many have a presidential library?"

Another city that finds itself able to compete well above its weight class is Grand Rapids, which boasts a quality infrastructure and services package that extends to a skywalk and two four-diamond hotels physically connected to the





IMAGE: EXPERIENCE GRAND RAPIDS

Far left: Gathering crowds in Little Rock. Above: Kinder Lake at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston. Left: Downtown Grand Rapids

convention complex, as well as numerous historic buildings redone as ballroom and event spaces—perfect for those seeking a one-of-a-kind venue. The downtown area is clean, safe and vibrant, and everyone you meet is a tourist ambassador.

“Our clients would tell you that what makes us unique is our collaborative spirit,” says Doug Small, president and CEO of Experience Grand Rapids. “Everyone, from the mayor to private business owners, is involved in our processes and marketing, resulting in a true community sell.”

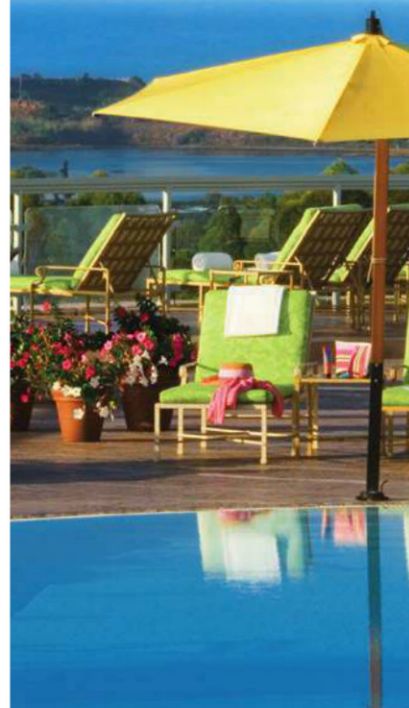
Down in Houston, the city has taken the spirit of collaboration internationally by becoming one of 10 destinations that have joined together to form the Best Cities Global Alliance. The idea is that, following a successful event at home, each member can then

refer business to one of its partners—making it vital that each make an effort to maintain a high level of service.

“Then we can also offer easy transport links, great facilities and plenty of new investment in the immediate area around our convention centers,” adds Visit Houston CEO Greg Ortale. “All combined, this makes us a tier-one event destination.”

Easy accessibility and first-rate facilities have also been vital to Philadelphia consolidating its position as a prime location for events. “Our convenient setting regularly helps organizations break attendance records. Philadelphia is within a day’s drive of 40 percent of the U.S. population, and getting here by air is affordable and convenient,” says Jack Ferguson, president and CEO of the city’s Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Plus,

18 holes of golf  
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in the afternoon  
artfully crafted cuisine  
in the evening  
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## MEETINGS & CONVENTIONS

A HEMISPHERES PROMOTION



IMAGE: GREG BENSON FOR PHLCVB

## EASY ACCESSIBILITY AND FIRST-RATE FACILITIES HAVE BEEN VITAL TO PHILADELPHIA CONSOLIDATING ITS POSITION AS A PRIME LOCATION FOR EVENTS

we can offer a plethora of diverse museums, tax-free shopping, historic landmarks, lush parks and world-class dining options.”

In the heart of Center City, the LEED-certified convention center features one million square-feet of saleable space, the ability to host two major trade shows simultaneously and the largest contiguous exhibit space in the Northeast. It’s no wonder, then, that the city has become a hotbed of hotel development activity. “Over the next few years we expect Philadelphia’s reputation as a modern renaissance city and smart choice for hotel development to take root even further, ultimately benefitting our customers from around the world,” says Ferguson.

“Amenities at all levels are the lifeblood of a visitor destination,” explains Steve Hammond, CEO and president at the Sacramento Convention & Visitors Bureau. That’s why the city has worked hard to respond to the new realities of meeting planners, and now offers affordable convention center rates, new hotel and shopping products, additional parking and improved in-house services. However, it has also managed to set itself apart by looking backwards as well as forwards.

“We believe that much of what lies ahead resides in our ability to recapture and honor our region’s rich heritage,” says





Top and right: The Country Music Hall Of Fame.  
Above: The Sacramento skyline



Hammond. "Old Sacramento and our Gold Rush history have to be front and center as we promote our visitor product."

Similarly, the exposure to new and exciting cultures provides the perfect reason to move your event south of the border to Tabasco, the cultural capital of southeast Mexico. Here you'll find everything you'd expect from a modern business city, such as the Tabasco 2000 Convention Center, but also a vibrant nightlife, fantastic restaurants and a number of beautiful natural attractions that'll keep your guests busy from the moment the meeting is done.

#### Events with a difference

In addition to the continued efforts of visitor organizations all across the Americas, you'll find a succession of unique companies looking to prove that conventions don't have to be conventional.

"We pride ourselves in not just being another venue," says Jo Ellen Drennon McDowell, senior director of event

**"WE WANT TO HELP  
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management at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville. "We want to help a planner create an event where their guests will go home with a memorable experience that was the highlight of their time away."

To this end, the venue offers a variety of new restaurants, shops and the Hatch

Show Print—a historic letterpress shop, in operation since 1879—while museum tours can be added onto any event. It has recently more than doubled in size, with the addition of a 10,000-square-foot event hall, 800-seat CMA Theater and the rooftop Carlton Terrace, which offers views of the downtown skyline and a beautiful green space in the heart of the city. "We're truly a one-stop shop with incredible spaces, southern hospitality and sophisticated catering," adds Drennon McDowell.

In Chicago, Eva Niewiadomski is committed to shifting people's definitions of what makes a productive meeting environment: "You can have the best content but people will tune out if they can't get up and change gears for a little while."

That's why, when she opened Catalyst Ranch 12 years ago in the city's old meatpacking district, she concentrated on providing large rooms filled with natural light and incorporated break-out spaces, decorated with ethnic artwork and





Left: The unique space at Chicago's Catalyst Ranch. Below and bottom: Safari tours and spas complete the Catalina experience



vintage furniture. "Our first philosophy was to get people to move around as this stimulates thinking," says Niewiadomski. "And then we find that everyone will see something in the design of the room that reminds them of growing up and so takes them back to a time when everyone had fantastic imaginations and nobody was bound by labels or limitations." The result: Chicago's most creative meeting and event space.

Or, for a venue that really stretches the definition of event space, why not go karting? David and Susan Dangler founded K1 Speed in Carlsbad in 2003, and were quick to see the value of adding event options as part of their portfolio. The company now operates over 18 centers nationwide, all of which are equipped with state-of-the-art meeting rooms, spacious lobbies and a snack bar.

"Adding an element of fun enhances the meeting experience, which is further elevated by introducing competition," says Susan. "Our customers tell us that their turn-out for off-site events is higher than usual when they book with us. Nothing bonds the group better than a little inner-office rivalry on the track."

Or, if your idea of fun is more

traditional, head to Catalina Island, 22 miles off the coast of Southern California, which offers everything you could hope for in a relaxing seaside destination—plus zip-lining through canyons, wild buffalo safari tours and the Dolphin Quest Adventure for those in search of thrills.

In Catalina, every meeting attendee is able to have a vacation experience, but this does not come at the expense of a quality event. A variety of sophisticated venues—headlined by the stunning Descanso Beach Club—come with the finest in amenities, up-to-date technology and personalized service, while the Santa Catalina Island Company is continually striving to make the location more appealing to event planners. This includes an \$8 million renovation plan to, in part, deliver a refreshed look and 13,000-square-foot clubhouse for the Beach Club, and the June opening of the Island Spa Catalina, the island's first-ever resort spa.

Whichever of these destinations you choose, you're always certain of a welcoming response and a commitment to meeting all of your goals and needs—in turn creating an event that will live in your attendees' minds long after they return home.

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