

Site Selection

Destinations to Watch



Why Planners Are Keeping an Eye on These Cities

By Derek Reveron

When stakeholders call a meeting to discuss site selection, planners better come to the table prepared with more than a random wish list. Being able to identify destinations with the best meetings infrastructures is the key, of course, and the most meaningful are those with peer-to-peer recommendations.

For example, surveys conducted by Watkins Research Group to find “The Best,” the “Most Improved” and the “Highly Recommended” asked planners to rate destinations based on eight “key attributes,” including hotels, accessibil-

ity, convention services and facilities, and having a “superior” CVB or DMO. Preferred meeting destinations often have several characteristics in common. For example, they are renovating and/or expanding their convention centers, building new hotels and renovating existing ones, and offering more unique venues that celebrate the local culture. They are expanding airport terminals and runways as well as enhancing the airport services and amenities. In addition, they offer their own destination-specific unique attractions. And lastly, they compete fiercely for meeting and conven-

tion business and are posting increased meeting and convention business and hotel occupancy.

Here are some cities that rank high on some planner preferred lists.

Austin

Austin offers much more than one of the nation’s most diverse and liveliest music scenes — a huge draw for groups including National Instruments, a test, measurement and control solutions company in Austin, which held its annual customer and sales conference attracting about 6,000 attendees from



Austin



Boston



Chicago

the United States and abroad. The conference was held in the Austin Convention Center (ACC).

Rod Siebels, senior group event manager – Americas, National Instruments, says that Austin's music scene makes it an attractive meeting destination without being a resort city. "We have an evening allotted for conference parties, which last year used several downtown 6th Street music venues to create a music experience for all attendees," says Siebels. "We have also done a local band at a single venue in the past at locations like the ACL Moody Theater, Palmer Event Center, The Long Center, Brazos Hall and others."

Siebels also touts the capacity and service of the ACC, where the group held most of its events. "We chose the ACC due to our size requirements," says Siebels. "We have an extensive number of speakers and 18-content track rooms, and they go above and beyond in helping my team plan and execute. As Austin has grown, the ACC has kept up its level of dedication and professionalism. The working relationship among the ACC, ACVB and hoteliers is world class. They come together to meet the challenges that a group like mine present."

Siebels also cites Austin's properties. "The new and renovated hotels are fantastic additions," he says. "The proximity of the ACC to the hotel inventory is fantastic."

New properties include the 1,012-room, 34-story JW Marriott Downtown, the largest hotel in Austin, and the 366-room, 20-story Westin Austin Downtown Hotel. The Westin features 15,000 sf of meeting and event space and is located a few blocks from the Austin Convention Center. A dual-brand, 33-story Aloft and Element project is

under construction and scheduled for completion in mid-2017.

Boston

Boston, already a popular meeting and convention destination, is broadening business by attracting major sporting events. The international sporting events that Beantown will host over the next few years include the ISU World Figure Skating Championships, the IndyCar series Grand Prix of Boston, the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball East Regional and the Tall Ships Festival as part of the Canada 150 Tall Ships Regatta.

New projects include the Loews Boston Hotel's \$10 million renovation, which includes upgrades of all 225 guest rooms and suites, free Wi-Fi, six meeting rooms and a mini-ballroom with a 100-person capacity for receptions.

The 418-room Boston Marriott Burlington finished a multimillion-dollar renovation that expanded meeting space to 14,570 sf and includes a new restaurant.

The Hotel Commonwealth completed a \$50 million renovation, adding 96 rooms and 7,500 sf of meeting space, doubling total meeting and event space to 14,000 sf, including an outdoor terrace overlooking Fenway Park.

The Boston Park Plaza completed a \$100 million upgrade of its 1,054 guest rooms, six restaurants and 50,000 sf of meeting space.

Chicago

Chicago offers a range of unique venues and meeting facilities, headlined by McCormick Place, one of the nation's foremost meetings and conventions facilities. McCormick Place, which offers 1.2 million sf of meeting space and 2.6 million sf of exhibit space, is located

within a five-mile radius of more than 33,000 downtown Chicago hotel rooms.

Looking to attract even more meetings and conventions, McCormick Place has made several improvements that include faster Wi-Fi, a rooftop garden and a 10,000-seat event facility. A new 1,200-room Marriott Marquis is under construction next to McCormick Place. The property joins the onsite Hyatt Regency McCormick Place with 1,260 guest rooms and a 25,000-sf conference center.

In other hotel news, the Chicago Hilton is undergoing a \$16 million restoration of 658 guest rooms and 10 meeting rooms. The Renaissance Chicago Downtown is undergoing phase two of its renovation, which includes 4,000 sf of additional meeting space and a new ballroom overlooking the Chicago River.

Cleveland

Cleveland, once an afterthought when it came to meetings and conventions, has transformed itself into a competitive destination with expanded meeting space, nightlife, arts and increasing hotel capacity.

Cleveland plans to increase the number of available hotel rooms by 15 percent before 2017. More than 20 hotel projects representing more than 3,400 rooms are either under construction or are scheduled to break ground this year.

The projects include a 280-story, 600-room Hilton that will be connected to the 225,000-sf FirstMerit Convention Center of Cleveland, which opened last year and will host the 2016 Republican National Convention. Properties that have opened over the past two years include the 494-room Westin Cleveland, a conversion of a former Crowne Plaza; and the 135-room Aloft Hotel.



Columbus

Twenty years ago, Columbus was not among the nation's most popular meeting destinations. In recent years, however, Columbus has gradually ramped up its meetings infrastructure and is an up-and-coming meeting destination.

Numbers tell the story. During the last quarter of 2015, Columbus hosted 126 groups, citywide events, conventions and sporting events. In 2014 (the latest year available), hotel occupancy overall increased 3 percent, the average daily rate (ADR) grew 5.5 percent and RevPAR rose 8.7 percent, according to Smith Travel Research.

The rising number of groups meeting in Columbus includes a company that recently held a meeting for 200 members of its nationwide corporate leadership team.

The company chose Columbus because of all the improvements in the city's meetings-related infrastructure. "New hotels have really added to the attractiveness of the destination," says the company's planner, a CMP who wished to remain anonymous. "Downtown Columbus has really been revitalized over the last few years, everywhere from the outdoor event space at the Columbus Commons and Scioto Mile — a riverfront park system featuring interactive fountains, a 3-D installation and a cultural arts center — to the restaurants and shopping at Short North and Easton Town Center."

The planner, who says Columbus now offers a better selection of meeting hotels, has held meetings at the Hilton Polaris, Northpointe Hotel and Conference Center, and Embassy Suites Dublin.

The meeting for 200 attendees took place at the Sheraton on Capitol Square (403 rooms, 16,500 sf of meeting space) for several practical reasons. "We were able to take over most of the meeting

space," says the planner. "The ballroom could accommodate the entire group in rounds, plus we needed seven additional breakout spaces for five days. They could offer separate meeting space for lunches with nice outdoor views. Also, the downtown location was great for guests since it is close to both our office and restaurants for guests."

New projects in the city include a \$125 million renovation and expansion of the Greater Columbus Convention Center (GCCC). The project, which began in September, will result in 373,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space and a new 800-car parking garage that will connect to GCCC by skywalk.

New properties include a new Courtyard by Marriott with an accompanying 13,000-sf Grand Event Center that offers three meeting rooms and a ballroom that accommodates up to 400 people. The 135-room hotel will open by summer 2016.

A new dual-branded Marriott and Renaissance Inn will open with a 240-room, full-service Marriott and a 114-room Residence Inn, and include 12,000 sf of meeting and event space.

Denver

Denver offers much more for meetings than views of the Rocky Mountains and a pristine natural environment. The mile-high city provides everything a planner needs for successful meetings including several neighborhoods popular among visitors.

LoDo (Lower Downtown) is a 26-square-block area offering more than 90 restaurants, rooftop cafés, breweries, music clubs and sports bars. LoDo also features the nation's largest concentration of restored turn-of-the-century Victorian brick warehouses.

Meeting and convention venues are

headlined by the Colorado Convention Center (CCC). In November, Denver voters passed a special initiative that approves expansion of the CCC. The expansion will add up to 85,000 sf of new flexible meeting space, 120,000 sf of new prefunction space and increased capacity for Wi-Fi and streaming video.

Like many top destinations, Denver is attracting more meetings. The number of people visiting Denver for conventions and business travel in 2014 (the latest figures available) increased 5 percent, or 2.4 million, over 2013, according to a report commissioned by Visit Denver, the city's CVB.

Denver offers roughly 44,000 hotel rooms citywide and almost 10,000 rooms within walking distance of the CCC. These properties include the Hyatt Place/Hyatt House hotel, which opened in November two blocks from the CCC. Other new downtown properties include the 221-room Renaissance Denver Downtown City Center, and the 150-room Aloft Hotel Denver, downtown.

In addition, the 519-room Westin Denver International Airport opened in November with 27,500 sf of meeting space. The hotel is one of only four in the nation directly attached to an airport terminal. The Westin Denver will have its own station on the 23-mile electric commuter rail that will open April 2016 and run from the airport to Union Station downtown. Properties under construction include the dual-branded AC Hotels by Marriott and Le Meridien Hotel, scheduled to open downtown in early 2017.

Indianapolis

Indianapolis boasts one of the best collections of meeting spaces in the nation, led by the Indiana Convention Center



Indianapolis



Milwaukee



Nashville

(ICC), which was almost doubled in size and is now the 17th largest in the nation.

The ICC offers 566,600 sf of exhibit space, 71 meeting rooms and three ballrooms. The ICC is connected via walkway to Lucas Oil Stadium, a multiuse facility with 12 meeting rooms named "Best Stadium of the Year" three consecutive years by *Stadium Journey Magazine*. Together, the two facilities offer 749,000 sf of exhibit space and connect via enclosed skywalks to 4,500 hotel rooms and 12 hotels. More than 300 restaurants, shops and attractions are within walking distance of the facilities.

Unique venues include the Grand Hall & Conference Center at Historic Union Station, built in 1888. The facility now offers more than 55,000 sf of space covering 30 breakout rooms and five ballrooms, including the Grand Hall seating 850 people and the 300-seat capacity Illinois Street Ballroom. Another venue, the European-styled Indiana Roof Ballroom, is a 15,700-sf facility that includes a 3,000-sf bar and 8,700-sf ballroom encircled by a 2,500-sf promenade area.

Milwaukee

Planners are attracted to Milwaukee's convention and meeting "campus," which consists of the Wisconsin Center (WC), the Milwaukee Theatre and the UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena. The WC offers 188,695 sf of contiguous exhibit space and the 37,506-sf Grand Ballroom. Meeting space includes 39,640 sf that can be divided into 28 meeting and breakout rooms. The Milwaukee Theatre accommodates up to 4,086 people.

There are more than 16,000 hotel rooms in the Greater Milwaukee area that offer more than 120 meeting rooms. Properties include the renovated 729-room Hilton Milwaukee, 481-room Hyatt

Regency Milwaukee and the upcoming Springhill Suites Milwaukee Downtown Marriott, which collectively offer 1,200 guest rooms and are connected via skywalk to the WC.

Nashville

The city's meeting business received a big boost since the opening of the downtown Music City Center (MCC), which includes 60 meeting rooms totaling 90,000 sf, a 57,500-sf Grand Ballroom and a 350,000-sf exhibit hall. So far during fiscal 2016, MCC has hosted 164 events with 324,167 attendees, according to Nashville's Convention Center Authority.

Nashville's hospitality industry has achieved an unprecedented milestone: 60 straight months of year-over-year record number of hotel rooms sold and hotel taxes collected. No other Top 50 destination city in the United States has ever reached 60 consecutive months of record growth, according to the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp. and based on research by STR.

Helping set the record was Ingram Micro Inc., which held their first-ever Nashville event — a conference for 1,900 sales and marketing employees as well as customers — at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, which offers 600,000 sf of meeting space.

Jennifer Pace, senior manager, event services, of the Williamsville, New York-based Ingram Micro, says the company chose Nashville for several reasons. Most important, Nashville has expanded its downtown meetings infrastructure, says Pace. "Nashville has focused on the meeting and event industry, and by that I mean continuously building hotels with large numbers of rooms and meeting space to capture business for big

meetings and conventions. The MCC is a great example. Other cities are looking at Nashville's success and thinking they can make changes and have the same kind of success."

Pace cites Nashville's top-notch meeting space and value. "We chose the Gaylord because of its vast amount of meeting space, which allowed us to keep the entire group under one roof," says Pace. "The value was also a driving factor as Nashville is still a great bang for your buck. We see it slightly changing with the popularity. As a planner that sees budgets staying stagnant, I hope that Nashville doesn't price itself so that repeat business can't afford it for their future meetings."

No other destination offers Nashville's unique musical culture. "It was a major focus during our meeting," says Pace. "We hired a local songwriter to write and perform a custom song about our event. It was a huge hit. We also hired a lot of local bands to entertain at our evening functions. We rented out the Wildhorse Saloon located downtown and brought our attendees there for the last night celebration."

Pace notes that Nashville also has a good selection of meeting hotels, including the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center. "The Gaylord Opryland provides exceptional service no matter what, but the hotel went above and beyond with their overall flexibility and managed our last-minute requests with success," says Pace. "They also took wonderful care of the event planning team, helping us to keep sane during the program operation. Gaylord also worked closely with us on budget and was able to get us discounted pricing for the offsite evening event at Wildhorse Saloon."

This may not be the last time that the



New York



San Francisco



San Diego

Ingram Micro group meets in Nashville. “We will absolutely consider Nashville as a meeting destination again,” says Pace. “We will also consider the Gaylord for future business as well as some downtown hotels for smaller events.”

New York

The Big Apple, a prime international destination, is in a class by itself when it comes to offering everything that a meeting needs to be successful. No other city in the world offers New York’s immense range of hotels, unique venues, restaurants, attractions, entertainment and shopping.

New York added about 6,000 new sleeping rooms to its hotel inventory last year, bringing the total to approximately 107,000 rooms.

Hotel inventory is a big reason why New York City welcomed a record number of meeting and convention attendees, 6.1 million, in 2015, according to NYC & Company, the city’s CVB. Overall, New York welcomed an estimated 58.3 visitors in 2015, up 1.8 million visitors from 2014.

Fred Dixon, president of NYC & Company, stated, “We are pleased to see a sixth year of tourism growth in New York City as we welcomed 58.3 million visitors last year. The city continues to evolve, always offering fresh reasons to visit again and again, with more new developments on the horizon. However, with the continuing pressure on the global economy and the strengthening dollar, we will all need to work even harder in 2016 to sustain our competitive edge.”

San Francisco

Ask planners to name the top meeting cities in the U.S. and San Francisco is often at the top of the list.

San Francisco attracts a range of meetings from small to citywides to some extent because of its diversity. The city offers several unique neighborhoods, art and cultural venues and one of the nation’s best dining scenes.

Meeting space is headlined by the Moscone Center, one of the nation’s premier convention facilities. The center is scheduled to complete its expansion in 2018, adding more than 170,000 sf of meeting space, including a 50,000-sf ballroom. An enclosed pedestrian bridge will connect the center’s North and South building.

The San Francisco Travel Association hopes to draw more meetings with the recent introduction of its “Meeting Neighborhoods” concept. Hotels and venues in unique neighborhoods will cooperate to provide more meeting spaces and guest rooms than a single property can provide.

No wonder visitors continue to flock to San Francisco, giving it one of the highest hotel occupancy levels in the nation — about 84 percent. The city continues to add new rooms and improve existing ones.

New and improved San Francisco hotels include the 1,195-room Westin St. Francis, which opened in 1904 and has renovated 50,000 sf of meeting and special event space in the Landmark and Tower buildings. Improvements include art deco architecture, fresh paint, new carpeting, crafted chandeliers and energy-efficient LED lighting.

Hyatt and San Francisco International Airport have agreed to co-brand and co-manage the 350-room Grand Hyatt San Francisco International Airport, which is scheduled to open in mid-2019.

The Palace Hotel has completed a \$40 million renovation, which includes

redesigned guest rooms and public space, including the Garden Court.

San Diego

This West Coast gem offers perfect year-round weather for meetings accompanied by an expanding infrastructure of hotels and meeting space. As a result, San Diego is booming with hotel and meeting growth.

Citywide hotel occupancy was 74.6 percent in 2014 and was projected to increase to 77.7 percent in 2015 and surpass 78 percent in 2016 and 2017, according to a San Diego study by Tourism Economics. Downtown hotel occupancy exceeded 80 percent. ADR was estimated to increase 6.1 percent in 2015 and REVpar was projected to rise 10.5 percent.

According to reports published in February 2016, more than 2,000 hotel rooms are under construction in San Diego after years of drought, with roughly 7,400 more in the pipeline.

Two midrise properties within Liberty Station are under construction, as is a 300-room luxury hotel downtown, and a highrise on Lane Field is nearing completion. In Oceanside, there are multiple mid-sized projects in various planning stages, and Legoland proposed a second themed hotel.

Other projects include a new 400-room InterContinental Hotel on the waterfront at the site of a former ballpark. The project is expected to debut in early 2018. Kimpton’s 235-room Hotel Solamar plans to update all guest rooms, the event center and lobby space in a “high-end Mediterranean style.” The completion date is set for spring 2016. Meeting rooms and the ballroom also will get new carpeting and new lighting.

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