



# MEETINGS AND CONVENTIONS

## FEATURES

# 7 Cities to Watch

**These second-tier destinations are going all-out to attract meetings business**

by Chris Duthie | May 01, 2017



In downtown Omaha, a 35,000-square-foot mural painted on the Energy Systems Building highlights the city's people and history.

**Watch out Orlando,** Las Vegas, Miami, Chicago, San Diego, Phoenix and all the other big convention towns. A number of highly attractive second-tier meeting destinations are poised to nab more market share on the strength of superb services, fun attractions, engaging localities and big-ticket investments. Here are seven that deserve serious consideration.

### **Omaha, Neb.**

Omaha has a long and storied history of entertaining travelers that began long before President Lincoln made it the eastern terminus of the first transcontinental railroad in 1863.

Today, the city's Missouri River locale is a vibrant metropolis of nearly half a million residents, including billionaire Warren Buffet and his Berkshire Hathaway investment group, plus four other Fortune 500 companies.

Returning visitors will note a major hotel boom within the historic downtown. Leading the way is the new 333-room Omaha Marriott Downtown at the Capital District, which will feature a rooftop pool and 33,000 square feet of meeting space, including an 11,000-square-foot ballroom. Opening in June, the hotel is across the street from the CenturyLink Arena & Convention Center, which has 194,000 square feet of contiguous exhibition space, 63,000 square feet of meeting space and a 31,000-square-foot grand ballroom. The facility also features a 18,300-seat arena; a skywalk connects to the 600-room Hilton

Omaha Hotel and its own 39,000 square feet of conference space.

Four more hotels will debut in 2017: the 72-room Comfort Suites La Vista (spring), the 80-room Omaha Airport and 102-room Home2 Suites Omaha (both in May), and the 81-room Candlewood Suites Omaha Millard (June). Planned for 2018 are the Aloft Omaha West, the Comfort Suites Carter Lake, the Comfort Inn & Suites Blair, the Courtyard Council Bluffs and more.

Omaha's major attractions include the Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum, the Joslyn Art Museum and the Holland Performing Arts Center. The revitalized riverfront shines with verdant parks and river-spanning pedestrian bridges linking to Council Bluffs, Iowa. After hours, visit cobblestoned Old Market with its shops, galleries, theaters and taverns, plus premium eateries like Plank Seafood Provisions, Nicola's and Le Bouillon.

**Special meeting venue:** The Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium has a number of areas for day and evening events, such as the Desert Dome and Kingdoms of the Night, which bring the animals of three deserts under the world's largest geodesic dome. The facility hosts dinners for up to 50 or 300 for a reception.

## Columbus, Ohio

The Ohio state capital's buzz-worthy status goes well beyond its acclaim for warm hospitality. With a population of 823,000, the city scores major kudos for a variety of head-turning meeting resources, like the fully renovated and expanded Columbus Convention Center that in July will unveil 373,000 square feet of contiguous exhibition space added to its 1.8 million-square-foot total.



Long lauded for its attention to renovation, preservation and revitalization, the city continues its renaissance with moves like last year's 75,000-square-foot expansion of the Ohio Expo Center & State Fair, a \$37 million upgrade of the Columbus Museum of Art and the addition of 33 acres of reclaimed green space to downtown's Scioto Mile, which connects the Scioto River with a network of parks, boulevards, bikeways and pedestrian paths.

Downtown Columbus has 4,000 guest rooms, all within 10 minutes of John Glenn Columbus International Airport. Newly opened are the 135-

From top: The Scioto River winds gracefully through a revitalized Columbus, Ohio, while in Madison, WI., the Wisconsin State Capitol presides over a friendly, intimate college town.

room Courtyard by Marriott Columbus OSU, which sits alongside the 13,000-square-foot Grand Event Center, and the 49-room Hotel LeVeque, a Marriott Autograph Collection property in the historic LeVeque Tower. The Hampton Inn & Suites Columbus--Downtown, across from the convention center, is about to complete a revamp of its 179 guest rooms. And in June, a \$50 million, twin-brand, 240-room Marriott hotel and 114-room Residence Inn will open with 12,000 square feet of meeting space near Ohio State University.

Nightlife options include the galleries and restaurants in the Short North, concerts and pro sports in the Arena District, and the historic ambience of German Village. Foodies will love the Barcelona Restaurant & Bar, the Pearl, Rigsby's Kitchen and the butterfat-laced delights of Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams.

**Special meeting venue:** The Smith Bros. Hardware Building just opened a 12,000-square-foot rooftop space that complements existing event areas in the six-story, landmark-1926 structure.

### **Madison, Wis.**

Home to several schools, including the main campus of the University of Wisconsin, this charismatic and intimate metropolis with a population of 555,000 also packs amazing vibes.

The fun starts with the variety of "Madtown" attractions like the Olbrich Botanical Gardens, the Chazen Museum of Art and Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Taliesin East in nearby Spring Green. A round of high-caliber golf is as close as the Robert Trent Jones Jr.-designed University Ridge Golf Course.

Madison is perched on an isthmus between lakes Mendota and Monona, where sailing, kayaking, fishing, skating, cross-country skiing and ice-kiting accentuate an active itinerary of bicycling, hiking, golf and snowshoeing.

A diverse restaurant scene ranges from classic Cajun to spicy Thai to complement the city's progressive, cosmopolitan persona. To sample eateries like the Freehouse Pub, Hubbard Avenue Diner and the Village Green, all in the Middleton district, join one of the many guided food tours or pub crawls.

Underscoring all of the above are premier meeting properties such as the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center. On the shores of Lake Monona, the facility has 85,000 square feet of meeting space, a 37,000-square-foot exhibition hall, a 13,524-square-foot ballroom, a large rooftop terrace that can host 3,000 and much more. Connected by skywalk is the 240-

room Hilton Madison Monona Terrace, which offers its own flexible event space. Newbies include the 165-room AC Hotel Madison, opening in May near Capital Square, and the 90-room Fairfield Inn and Suites by Marriott--Madison/Verona.

**Special meeting venue:** The 164-acre Alliant Energy Center offers four spacious and versatile meeting spaces, including a 255,000-square-foot exhibition hall and the 10,000-seat Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

## Boise, Idaho

Boise's dynamic appeal is perhaps best exemplified by Boise Centre, which in July will complete a \$47.5 million, 52,000-square-foot expansion that pushes its upscale convention space to 92,000 square feet, adds a new ballroom, swells the total of meeting rooms to 29 (plus two levels of prefunction space), and includes a concourse that connects to the 252-room Grove Hotel and the 5,000-seat CenturyLink Arena.

At the forefront of a downtown hotel boom is the 110-room Inn at 500 Capitol, which opened in January with fine dining, a fitness center, free WiFi, 2,300 square feet of meeting space and complimentary bicycles. The hotel is steps from Boise Centre and the Boise River Greenbelt, a 25-mile pathway ideal for biking, walking and running.

Debuting this spring are a 152-room Hyatt Place and a 180-room Residence Inn by Marriott, bringing the city's total room count to well over 6,000. Other major properties include the 303-room Riverside Hotel and the 112-room Hotel 43, all in a walkable downtown studded with dozens of restaurants, including the acclaimed Alavita, Bardenay, Chandlers Steakhouse and Superb Sushi.



The Boise River is a playground for outdoor enthusiasts.

A former Oregon Trail military post, Boise's natural appeal includes fishing, hiking, mountain-biking, skiing and Boise River kayaking and rafting. The city's mild climate has inspired seven wineries to take root within the rich volcanic soil of the nearby Snake River Valley, and two microbreweries will debut in town in the near future, adding to the hip vibe in this home to 215,000 residents and cultural draws that include ballet, opera and a Shakespeare festival.

Boise Airport offers direct air service from 20 major cities and free shuttles to most hotels.

**Special meeting venue:** In downtown, the ornate Egyptian Theatre, built in the 1920s to show silent films, provides 740 seats for group gatherings.

## Irving, Texas

In Irving, just 17 minutes southwest of Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, planners are empowered with first-tier accessibility, accommodations, amenities and attractions, all without the big-city hassles.

Leading Irving's mission to offer signature meeting facilities is a \$110 million, 350-room Westin hotel rising next to the stylish Irving Convention Center at Las Colinas. When completed next winter, the hotel will feature 16,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 10,000-square-foot ballroom.



From top: Tampa, Fla., retains its laid-back Gulf Coast allure. In Irving, Texas, the Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas features gracious outdoor event space.

In September, the \$200 million Irving Music Factory at Las Colinas will open next to the convention center. Features will include an 8,000-seat indoor/outdoor concert hall plus a large plaza that will stage fashion shows, food festivals and other events. The facility will be complemented by 250,000 square feet of restaurants, retail, a movie theater and a comedy club.

Such improvements will markedly elevate the allure of the 275,000-square-foot, Silver LEED-certified Irving Convention Center, which opened in 2011. The venue sports a 48,500-square-foot exhibit hall, a 20,000-square-foot ballroom and 20 breakout rooms.

The city currently offers 75 hotels and 12,000 guest rooms with easy access to attractions in nearby Dallas and Fort Worth. Luxury accommodations are found at the 431-room Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas, which has 41,000 square feet of meeting space and the LAW (for land, air and water) signature restaurant. Off-site dining options include Via Real, which serves Southwestern cuisine and has four spacious private rooms, and the Ranch, a honky-tonk featuring live music and Texas-style grub like grilled Kobe beef, catfish and chipotle meatloaf.

**Special meeting venue:** At the Four Seasons Resort, gatherings take place on the event lawn overlooking the 18th fairway of the hotel's TPC golf course.

### **Tampa, Fla.**

Florida's third-largest metropolis has evolved into a laid-back but increasingly popular beach destination jammed with effervescent experiences and some 21,400 hotel guest rooms.

Access is better than ever following a just-completed, \$1 billion expansion of Tampa International Airport. Nearby attractions include the Tampa Riverwalk, the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center and Busch Gardens amusement park. The popular WestShore District is pulsating with restaurants, taverns and shops. Also near to the airport is the 600,000-square-foot Tampa Convention Center on the waterfront, with 200,000 square feet of exhibition space and a 36,000-square-foot ballroom.

On the hotel scene, a new 175-room AC Hotel by Marriott Tampa/Airport will open in December. Undergoing revamps are the 160-room Residence Inn Tampa WestShore Airport, the 243-room Embassy Suites by Hilton Tampa Airport/WestShore and the 719-room Tampa Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina. In nearby Clearwater Beach, the 230-room Opal Sands Resort has debuted with a 7,650-square-foot ballroom and 17,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space.

In their free time, attendees can wander the brick-lined walkways of the historic, Cuban-influenced Ybor City, celebrated for hand-rolled cigars, shopping, coffee shops and cafés, including Florida's original family-owned Columbia Restaurant, which opened in 1905. For other scrumptious fare, search out Bern's Steak House, Restaurant BT, Kojak's House of Ribs and the Byblos Café.

**Special meeting venue:** District 3 is a historic warehouse transformed into 22,000 square feet of airy, high-tech event space with flexible staging and capacity for 2,800 guests.

### **Virginia Beach, Va.**

A rising star among savvy planners, Virginia Beach has a pretty Chesapeake Bay setting and a location easily reached by car, plane or train by two-thirds of the nation's population. But there's a lot more to "ViBe," as the city is nicknamed. For one thing, the storied beachfront, with its 59-block, immaculately landscaped boardwalk, is upping its snazz quotient. Anchoring the effort is the Virginia Beach Convention Center, a LEED Gold facility with 150,000 square feet of column-free exhibit space, 26 breakout areas, 31,000 square feet of ballroom space, and a tower with an observation deck and a 1,077-square-foot VIP room, all within three miles of more than half of the area's 12,000 guest rooms.

Among posh hotel options, the 85-room Cavalier Virginia Beach has reopened after a \$70 million makeover added a spa, fine-dining, an indoor saltwater pool and a bourbon distillery to complement a

2,490-square-foot ballroom and three meeting rooms. This spring the 19-story, 156-room Hyatt House Virginia Beach/Oceanfront will debut with a fitness center, an indoor pool and 1,943 square feet for meetings.



Taking wing: Virginia Beach's Military Aviation Museum

While jet-skiing, kayaking, surfing, sport-fishing, scuba-diving, parasailing and dolphin-spying have unmistakable appeal, the city ups the ante with attractions like the 9,250-acre Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the 1,300-seat Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, Adventure Park's myriad obstacle courses and zip-lining, and the restored aircraft at the Military Aviation Museum.

Add some great dining to the mix, including fresh seafood at Citrus, Mahi Mah's and Big Sam's Inlet Café & Raw Bar, and the new Commune, a farmer-owned eatery that crafts its menu with an on-site herb and vegetable garden, henhouse-fresh eggs and homemade baked goods.

**Special meeting venue:** For extra-special gatherings, reserve the transcending and breath-stealing Sky Bar on the 21st floor of the 289-room Hilton Virginia Beach Waterfront.



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