

# NEW WAVES IN THE SOUTH

The Gulf Coast bursts with fresh offerings

BY EDWARD SCHMIDT JR.

**F**rom the expanding golden sands of Galveston, Texas, to regally revamped properties in the Sunshine State, the Gulf Coast region offers a wealth of intriguing and exciting settings and venues for planners to ponder for their next event.

*Meetings Today* put on some shades and explored the region for newly launched and revamped offerings ready to host groups for meetings and events. Here are some of the very best, beginning in the Lone Star State.

## Texas

“Houston’s mix of international appeal and Southern charm attracts visitors with a wonderful mix of world-class arts, booming business, pro sports and award-winning cuisine,” says Mike Waterman, president of Visit Houston. “Plus, with major projects currently in the works, meeting planners will have even more to be excited about.”

In a bold effort to increase its appeal to meeting groups, Houston is making an unprecedented commitment to its

convention district.

“Roughly \$1.5 billion is being invested to re-imagine our convention district, including significant renovations to the George R. Brown Convention Center [GRB] itself to include new street-level restaurants, a large-scale, pedestrian-friendly plaza and more,” Waterman says. “Meanwhile, a 1,000-room Marriott Marquis is rising on the north side of the convention center, which, along with the existing Hilton Americas, will add a much-needed second headquarter hotel directly connected to the GRB.

“All of this is happening as the city prepares to host two high-profile events, the NCAA Final Four in April and the NFL Super Bowl in February 2017,” he continues. “It’s an exciting time to visit Houston.”

Other major developments include the METRORail expansion completed in May 2015, allowing more access to important sights, such as the GRB and Houston Theater District; the 325-room Hyatt Regency Hotel Houston Galleria, with 11,000 square feet of meeting space that opened in October 2015; and the fall 2016 scheduled opening of the 225-room Hotel Alessandra, a 25-story property with 10,000 square feet of

meeting space.

Fifty miles southeast of Houston, Galveston Island will unveil seven miles of new and expanded beaches by the summer of 2016. Other notable projects are the Moody Gardens Aquarium, which will receive a \$39 million upgrade, and

the recent opening of The Bryan Museum, which showcases the world’s largest private collection of Southwestern historical artifacts and offers indoor and outdoor meeting spaces.

## Louisiana

With its French Quarter, streetcars and Cajun cuisine, New Orleans is the antithesis of the homogenized American city.

“New Orleans is and always has been one of the most exciting and unique places to visit,” says Stephen Perry, president and CEO of the New Orleans CVB. “Our authentic destination has entered a new era of growth and prominence and continues to reinvent itself with upgrades to state-of-the-art venues and enhancements to the overall infrastructure to ultimately provide a better business experience, full of culinary excellence, culture and innovation.”

Slated to reopen in mid-2016 following a \$10 million renovation is the historic 106-room Pontchartrain Hotel on St. Charles Avenue in the Uptown district. The hotel’s legendary Caribbean Room restaurant, Bayou Bay and Silver Whistle coffee shop,



Bryan Museum, Galveston, Texas



NRG Stadium, Houston

will be reinvented and a new rooftop bar overlooking the Mississippi River will be set on the 14th story of the hotel.

The 107-room Marriott's Moxy Hotel, scheduled to open early this year, is part of a brand catering to Millennial travelers, and features high-tech lounges and modern design elements, among other innovative offerings.

Recently opened is the Lafitte Greenway, a 2.6-mile bicycle and pedestrian trail connecting Armstrong Park in the Treme neighborhood to City Park in Mid-City. The city spent more than \$9 million on the newly created "linear park," a re-imagining of a historic corridor that once served as a canal and then a railroad in its previous incarnations.

Also of note in the Big Easy is The Old No. 77 Hotel & Chandlery, a stylish 2015 entry that teams with the

handsome and historic nearby event venue The Chicory—and its 9,000 square feet of event space—as well as the unique Race & Religious, an enchanting compound of event structures and spaces that include a two-story Creole cottage constructed in the 1830s and a three-story Greek Revival Rowhouse from the 1840s.

## Mississippi

In a phenomenal comeback story, the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which received devastating damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, has rebounded in the past decade with renovations and new hotels that bring its room inventory back up to 95 percent of the total before the storm.

"Our destination offers the high energy of the casinos, great beaches and Southern hospitality," says Janice Jefferson, director of sales for Visit Mississippi Gulf Coast, which encompasses the counties of Harrison, Jackson and Hancock, and communities such as Biloxi, Gulfport and Pascagoula. "We offer lots of flexibility and affordability in our accommodations, giving groups a wide range of options and settings."

The newest property is the Scarlet Pearl Casino Resort in D'iberville, which debuted in December 2015. Highlighted by 60,445 square feet of gaming space, the 300-room, 18-story hotel also has 10,858 square feet of meeting space and six meeting rooms.

Set to open in March in downtown Gulfport is Fishbone Alley, a pedestrian walkway lined with restaurants and bars patterned

after Printer's Alley in Nashville.

For a unique venue, the Pascagoula River Audubon Center opened in October in Moss Point. The 4,000-square-foot, \$1.6 million facility offers boat tours of the river, elevated boardwalks, observation decks and meeting space, and a catering kitchen.

## Alabama

A waterfront convention center, walkable downtown and 6,000 hotel rooms are big draws for meeting groups in Mobile, a city situated at the head of Mobile Bay.

"Our downtown district has undergone a major revitalization in the past five years," says Stacy Hamilton, vice president of marketing and communications for Visit Mobile. "There are several new restaurants in that area, which is within easy walking distance of the convention center."

Recently relaunched in the downtown core is The Admiral Hotel Mobile, Curio Collection by Hilton, a 75-year-old property that received a multifaceted renovation. Featuring an Art Deco-inspired interior, The Admiral has two on-site restaurants and 6,000 square feet of meeting space.

Opened in September 2015, the GulfQuest/National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico is a 90,000-square-foot museum with 90 interactive exhibits, simulators and displays, and a variety of meeting and event venues.

The stunning white-sand beaches at Gulf Shores and Orange Beach are drawing visitors at a record-setting pace. According to Herb Malone, president and CEO for Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, each season in 2015 saw double-digit gains in lodging revenue and retail sales.

Malone recently announced the inception of "Leave Only Footprints," a collaborative beach initiative with the cities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, the Coastal Alabama Business Chamber, beach vendors and lodging properties to keep the beaches pristine and family-friendly.

## Florida

Florida's Gulf of Mexico coast offers a varied



Pascagoula River Audubon Center, Moss Point



Epicurean Hotel Tampa, Fla.



GulfQuest/National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico, Mobile, Ala.

assortment of settings ranging from urban to island.

In Tampa, three new boutique hotels recently debuted: Aloft Tampa Downtown, Le Meridien Tampa and Epicurean Hotel Tampa, a must-stay for foodies.

South of Tampa in the Fort Myers area, the 149-room Sundial Beach Resort & Spa on Sanibel Island, with 12,000 square feet of meeting space, recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation, and the 66-room Gasparilla Inn & Club on Boca Grande added five new estate homes to its accommodations menu.

In Naples, the 319-room Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club, which has spent \$50 million in renovations since 2010 in a multi-phased enhancement program, recently removed its brick balconies and replaced them with glass balconies in the Tower's 90 guest rooms and suites to better showcase its Gulf of Mexico views.

Near Naples, the Marco Island Marriott Beach Resort, Golf Club and Spa is undergoing a \$250 million expansion designed to convert the property to a JW Marriott brand resort in 2017, the brand's first beachfront resort in the continental U.S. When the transformation is completed the resort will feature 810 guest rooms and 100,000 square feet of meeting space. **M**



The Marco Island Marriott Beach Resort, Golf Club and Spa, Fla.