

SPREADING FOR



BY WENDY HELFENBAUM



IT'S ONE THING

to stage a large event in a giant convention center where nobody moves for four days. It's quite another when an entire city becomes your venue, with hundreds or thousands of attendees housed in various anchor hotels meeting in one or more locations and branching out for dining, offsite activities and special programs.

CVBs offer a lifeline—providing everything from best room block rates to marketing support to experiential ideas that can boost engagement and create memorable conferences for delegates.

Here's how four destinations are setting the gold standard to accommodate citywides.



FT. LAUDERDALE, FLA.



Events in the Sunshine State are natural draws, and that makes everyone very happy, says Ed Simon, senior vice president, convention sales and services for the Greater Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) CVB.



"We represent the whole of Broward County, and citywides are welcomed across our community; they help bring revenue and jobs to more than just downtown Fort Lauderdale," he says. "Whether they're participating in our attractions and golf courses, on our beaches or eating in our restaurants, the effect from these events is widespread."

Simon notes that although the area offers a wide variety of lodging, F&B and activities, everything is relatively close.

"It doesn't take a lot of time to go from the Everglades to the beach or anywhere in between, by land or by water," he says. "We do events on the beach and along the waterways throughout the city. We also have the world-renowned Everglades where we can do both social and team-building activities."

The onsite CVB team is the first to hear of new offerings such as Revolution, a new space featuring three entertainment venues on one property in the heart of downtown.

"For larger events, we have FATVillage, a creative district of warehouses where you can create your own event space indoors or outdoors," Simon adds.

"Citywides also open up our little piece of the world to businesses and other entities that might then relocate here. We work very closely with the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance and their economic development programs to try to bring companies to the area, particularly in the technology, marine and aviation industries. The opportunity to bring people into our town for three to four days at a time opens up potentially so much more down the road."

When Dan Zintsmaster, vice president of events for Team National, a membership savings company in the direct selling industry in Davie, Fla., needed a host city for his company's convention, he didn't have to look very far.

"We chose Fort Lauderdale because our corporate headquarters are close by, and we offer our folks who come from all across the U.S. a chance to tour our home office before or after attending the convention, and the chance to enjoy the many activities offered in this area like the beaches and airboats," he says.

Zintsmaster has held the event in Fort Lauderdale for the past five years, and has seen attendance more than double to 5,000 during that time.



"The CVB was awesome to work with; we both really wanted to make a great impression on our attendees to show off our hometown," he says. "They do an excellent job managing housing and working with us on the shuttles—we use multiple hotels—and helped customize our events and coordinate unique features."

For example, one year the mayor opened the event, and another year two huge sand sculptures were built inside the exhibit hall—the CVB also set up a Bahamian Junkanoo band and local dance troupe for the general session.

"It's great to be able to direct our groups to various restaurants and attractions in the area, from Bubba Gump Shrimp on the beach to the *Jungle Queen* tours," Zintsmaster says.

Delegates use The Water Taxi for private charters and beach facilities for special events at the Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort & Spa and the B Ocean Resort. Others have used the Pier Top and Pelican Bar at Pier 66, and the pool deck or the Marco Suite at the Hilton Fort Lauderdale Marina, for private team gatherings.

"This area just has so many options for different tastes," Zintsmaster says.

When you're selling a city where conventions are king, the main challenge is choosing from so many wonderful possibilities, says Julie Mullins, vice president of convention sales for Choose Chicago.

"Chicago is incredibly fortunate to have rich history and a soul," she says. "If planners want something modern or a building that's architecturally significant or outdoor space or a festival, we have something unique."

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From river experiences to festivals in Grant Park to concerts at Wintrust Arena or Soldier Field, planners can have it.

"We offer every convention customer a unique experience," Mullins says. "We can host formal dinners in museums or loft spaces that planners can design any way they want. If they're not sure about an event, we'll put them in touch with customers that have also met there."

She says McCormick Place hosts between 50 to 75

major citywide events annually.

"We're a huge economic driving factor in the success of our city, representing close to US\$2.2 billion of economic impact every year," Mullins says.

A range of great facilities sealed the deal when the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) chose Chicago for its 22,000-delegate Annual Conference & Exposition, held June 17-20.

"Chicago has an outstanding facility in McCormick Place, an excellent hotel package and, most importantly, it's a key business hub," says Lisa Block, vice president, events for the Alexandria, Va.-based SHRM.

McCormick Place hosted most events, but SHRM also used the Sheraton Grand, Fairmont and Hyatt Regency McCormick Place for ancillary activities. Receptions and dinners took place at the Chicago Firehouse Restaurant, Revel Motor Row, Chicago Cultural Center, Swift & Sons, Athena Greek Restaurant, Chicago Hilton and Towers and BLVD.

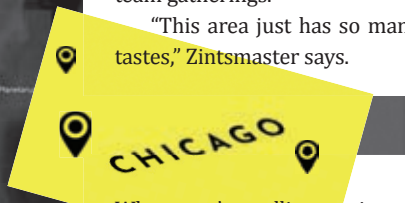
"It takes a village to effectively plan and execute a citywide event, and Choose Chicago was an outstanding partner that truly made a difference in the success of our event," Block says. "Chicago is a big, expensive city, and the staff at Choose Chicago and McCormick Place helped ensure we made wise investments, made an impact with our brand and selected vendors and venues that met our standards at the best possible price point. We've put Chicago on a regular rotation because our members love going there and the facilities are top notch."

"We love citywide meetings because our city is set up so well to host them, and because attendees get such a great feel for Portland and what we're all about," says James Jessie, vice president of convention sales for Travel Portland, which holds eight to 10 citywides per year.

"There's a lot of mindfulness here, and Portlanders are very intentional in their lives and in their work; even our event venues reflect who we are, so meeting attendees get to experience Portland like Portlanders do."

With no sales tax—including on F&B—planners get more bang for their buck, he adds, including an abundance of unique and flexible event venues, a nationally renowned transportation system and a team of knowledgeable convention services staff.

"Our service managers do everything from figuring out the best venues for your event, reaching out to different venues, offering ideas and helping planners incorporate sustainability and other elements Portland is known for into their programs," Jessie says.



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"Our team is especially appreciated for helping planners create meetings that feel uniquely Portland."

Some of the venues that reflect Portland's character—from its natural surroundings to its passion for craft beverages and farm-to-table food—include Coopers Hall (an urban winery), Portland Center Stage and The Evergreen atop Loyal Legion brewpub.

"We work year-long to maintain close working relationships with hotels and with our maker community—with restaurants, breweries, wineries and distilleries," Jessie says. "Our goal is to make hosting a meeting in Portland easy and fun. We want attendees to have the best possible experience so they'll want to keep coming back."

You must have lots to offer when you become a conference's first repeat city in 20 years.

The annual Medicaid Enterprise Systems Conference

used to host attendees in different states each year, says conference lead David Huffman, director of operations at New England States Consortium Systems Organization in Shrewsbury, Mass.

"The primary decision points for us were our very positive experience 10 years earlier coupled with the fact that many of the staff we interacted with are still there and knew us and

our conference," Huffman says.

This year's event took place in August, welcoming a record-high 1,607 attendees from across the U.S.

"The staff we worked with at Travel Portland and the Oregon Convention Center (OCC) did an outstanding job helping us to plan and implement our conference, assisting us in planning out the flow of people, menu selections and room setup to ensure that our attendees had a great experience," Huffman says.

The group used Hilton Downtown, The Duniway, DoubleTree, Hotel Rose and the Hotel Modera as host hotels. While all meetings were held at the OCC, several affiliates hosted networking events at restaurants including Jack Rabbit and Departure Restaurant + Lounge.

From standalone conference and meeting facilities to those within hotels, learning centers, museums and function space,



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there's plenty going on in Australia to attract planners looking for host cities.

With its 215,278-square-foot expansion in July, the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC) is Australia's largest convention and exhibition space, and comes with new audio, rigging, lighting and multimedia services. The new space is adjacent to a new, 347-room Novotel Melbourne South Wharf, which will enable the city to attract larger groups.

Australia's Gold Coast will attract 47 business events in the coming years, welcoming 24,400 attendees. Two other Australian convention centers—in Cairns and Adelaide—also received major facelifts, while the International Convention Centre in Sydney expanded its technology infrastructure. And Marriott International will open a 15-story luxury property in Adelaide by 2022.

"Melbourne offers the highest concentration of world-class conference facilities in Australia, and is home to the largest convention and exhibition center in the southern hemisphere, conveniently located in the heart of the city," says Karen Bolinger, CEO of the Melbourne Convention Bureau (MCB).

The city's excellent connectivity paves the way for highly successful conferences and events, Bolinger adds, with an international airport, quality accommodations and an extensive transport system serving the world's largest tram network operating across the city, with free rides within the city center.

Melbourne offers 31,481 guest rooms in hotels, motels and serviced apartments, with more than 4,300 rooms available within a 10-minute walk of the MCEC. Renowned as a vibrant, multicultural city with an exciting dining scene, the city has more than 3,500 restaurants featuring cuisines from 70 countries.

"MCB's 'Team Melbourne' approach means collaboration is well practiced, particularly in securing and hosting large-scale international business events, conferences and incentive programs," Bolinger says. "The city organically brings people together and creates an environment to foster partnerships and new opportunities. Not only do events held in Melbourne have the full support of the MCB, they also receive the backing of its partners, including the Victorian State Government, City of Melbourne, industry, academia and an extensive network of event service suppliers."

Melbourne is Australia's knowledge capital and innovation hub, and MCB's objective is to showcase Melbourne as a top choice destination for business events, Bolinger adds.

"MCB focuses on delivering conferences that reinforce Melbourne's global reputation as the smart capital and that are aligned with the states' priorities and future industry sectors," she says. "MCB also focuses on attracting citywide events that will have an impact on the community by delivering legacy outcomes and contributions that go beyond the dollars."

Wowing 2,800 senior scientists from 60 countries at the 16th Annual Meeting of the International Society

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for Stem Cell Research in June proved to be easy once the destination was chosen, says Cathy Vijeh, CMP, the director of global events, based in Skokie, Ill.

"Melbourne was the right city," she says. "It had a fantastic convention center, the hotel packages were great because they were within walking distance and it was just a really nice package for this group."

Vijeh's group did a global advisory forum dinner for VIPs at the University of Melbourne, Trinity College, and held the board of directors and sponsors president's reception at the Munich Brauhaus, right outside of the convention center.

"Being able to work with a city that is able to offer attractive and affordable hotel packages to your entire global delegation is a huge plus," she says. ■

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