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## Meetings at Play

Resorts and theme parks get down to business.

By Larry Bleiberg



When the Dermatology Nurses' Association opens the exhibit hall at its annual meeting this March, a special guest will be on hand. A giant mouse named Mickey will greet the 1,200 attendees, who will be gathering at Walt Disney World's Contemporary Resort.

Next winter, teens on a Phil Waldrep Ministries retreat will find a slice of heaven in between worship sessions and religious concerts: a three-and-a-half acre indoor water park in Sevierville, Tenn. At the Wilderness at the Smokies resort, the staff likes to note, it never drops below 82 degrees, even in the middle of December.

For the LaPierre family, a highlight of its four-generation family reunion last summer was a private pontoon boat tour near Branson, Mo. The hour-long trip on Table Rock Lake showcased the beauty of the mountains and introduced guests to Ozark folklore and history.

These three groups and many others have found that meetings and pleasure not only mix, but complement each other. Theme parks and resorts, long a favorite of vacationers, have found a solid following with meeting planners, even those organizing educational and religious gatherings, and reunions. Although the trend isn't new, it has held its own during the down economy, and in some places, has grown. With corporate business flat, sales managers are reaching out to nonprofit groups, and are willing to make deals to lure them in.

For planners, this is great news. Time and again, they've seen that these sites generate member enthusiasm and attendance. Preliminary registration numbers are proving the point for Robin Geary, who is planning the Dermatology Nurses' meeting at Disney World. "It's working," she says. "We're filling our room block."

Barry Roberts, who organizes more than a dozen meetings a year for the Phil Waldrep Ministries of Decatur, Ala., says it's common sense. "If we plan a conference in Hartselle, Ala., no one's coming, because they don't know what they can do there." By contrast, the Smoky Mountain tourist towns of Gatlinburg and Sevierville, Tenn., have been popular for ministry events over the years. Still, having a great site isn't enough, he says. "The main thing is getting it out to the people and promoting it."

Initially some members may question if meeting in a resort or theme park is appropriate for their organization. They fear the setting could interfere with, or overshadow, the gathering. Roberts says if an organization has its priorities clear, it shouldn't be a concern. He organizes an annual meeting of up to 4,000 youth. The event features religious music, worship services and top-notch inspirational speakers. "The conferences speak for themselves," he says.



## Wilderness at the Smokies

Next year's youth meeting at the Sevierville Events Center and Wilderness at the Smokies Hotel and Waterpark Resort offers the added attraction of an indoor park. It's a new host hotel for the event, and Roberts sees it as a plus. "Ministry is first, and that's No. 1, period. But in Christianity, having fun — there's nothing wrong with that either. For a lot of churches, it's a getaway, and we have to look for destinations that are appealing to them."

For some attendees, a meeting may take the place of a vacation. That's particularly true in this economy, when many families can't afford a separate holiday. To compensate, attendees often bring spouses and children along, and many hosts provide special packages to assure that guests are kept entertained. At Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa in Rancho Mirage, Calif., while one spouse is in meetings all day, the other spouse may be with kids in its Splashtopia waterpark, floating on the Lazy River ride. "It never mingles with the meetings in the building," says Dan Keyser, the director of sales and marketing. "It's all set on the back of the resort." But after the last PowerPoint of the conference is done, he says, attendees will often extend their visit for a couple days to join in the fun, too.

In fact, a theme park or resort may make for a better meeting. Rob Enriquez, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the Palm Springs CVB, says there's a clear benefit to gathering in a resort as opposed to a cookie-cutter city or airport hotel. "You get here and

it's just a feeling. It's an emotion," he says of the California desert oasis. "It's the climate. It's the terrain, the mountains that surround us, the palm trees." Taken all together, it makes the experience memorable. "When people are in a better environment they tend to absorb more. They're in tune with the experience — and the meeting. They take it away with them, and five years later they're still talking about it."

Kenny Smith, regional sales manager of Big Cedar Lodge near Branson, says he makes a point of watching attendees during meeting breaks. They step into an open area, which has leather seats and rocking chairs overlooking the Ozark Mountains. "I love walking by and seeing someone who doesn't have a cell phone in their hand, and instead they're sitting there almost mesmerized by the atmosphere and the ambience. It provides a setting for learning and creativity and productivity, and that in itself is a value."

That's exactly why Rick Whitmer says he has returned to the lodge since 2001 for the annual President's Retreat he organizes for Ron Hutchcraft Ministries, located in Harrison, Ark. The resort's atmosphere encourages reflection for attendees. "It allows them to refocus priorities, to be able to walk away from a weekend like this recharged, reenergized and renewed and ready to head back home with a new passion and a new vigor."

All this sounds appealing — and pricey. But not necessarily. Sales executives acknowledge they're now more willing to make deals with groups to attract business. That's partially because corporate business has slacked off, and resorts and parks have more slots to fill. Rancho Las Palmas' executive chef will confer with meeting planners to develop an affordable menu. Several times she has taken a popular appetizer, squash ravioli, and served it as an entrée. "We can do that economically for them as a meal," says sales director Keyser. "It's not lobster, it's not filet mignon, but once they eat it everyone loves it." The property also works with groups on dates. The Palm Springs region can be expensive in March, but the cost drops dramatically in the summer.

In Hershey, Pa., the busy season is summer. But spring and fall bring bargains. And often switching from a weekend to mid-week cuts the price as well. "We can make it a win-win," says Hershey Park sales manager Kevin Grant. He recalls one non-profit group that found it couldn't afford its original contract for a summer weekend. Most of the attendees were paying for it themselves, and they were personally being hit by the economy. But the park was able to renegotiate. By moving the event to mid-week, the price dropped, and more delegates could attend. Ultimately the park got extra business during a traditionally slow period. "It kept our revenues pretty much the same," Grant says.

## La Torretta Lake Resort & Spa

La Torretta Lake Resort & Spa in Montgomery, Texas, opened in November 2008 and has been working deals with clients from the start. As a new property, sales managers realized they would have to work to bring in business to the site, about an hour north of

Houston. But the resort has been strategic about discounting. “As opposed to just dropping prices out of the gate, we’ve targeted value-added,” says Jason Purifoy, director of sales and marketing. “We’ve added upgrades. It’s a minimal cost to us and something groups might have paid for in the past. We’ve offered complimentary welcome receptions on arrival and that saves them money. We’ve offered credits for every room night they’ve utilized, and that goes to their master bill.”

Even Disney, the largest theme park in the world, has proven willing to work with customers, says Geary of the Dermatology Nurses’ Association. She said sales managers were willing to reduce required minimum food and beverage costs for the group’s March meeting. Disney will also offer attendees discounted tickets for visiting its theme parks after 4 p.m., a special admission option not available to the public. The park began monorail service earlier than usual so that attendees in an overflow hotel, the Polynesian Resort, would have transportation to early morning events at the host hotel, the Contemporary Resort. “They couldn’t give away the store, but they were able to work with me and give me great prices I needed and discounts,” Geary says.

That’s a point echoed by Smith at Big Cedar Lodge. He says he’s been able to make concessions on things like food and beverage minimums, but only at certain times of year. He’s limited in his ability to cut costs during the high seasons of summer and October. There are long-term considerations, too. “We don’t want to sacrifice the brand. There’s a longtime penalty to pay if you make too many concessions.”

Resorts are betting that meeting business will continue to grow, and are building dedicated meeting sites and facilities. In October 2008, Big Cedar Lodge completed its Grandview Conference Center, which has a ballroom and flexible meeting space that can handle events for groups of 10 to 1,000. In Sevierville, the Wilderness at the Smokies resort is physically connected to a new conference center with more than 150,000 square feet of space. La Torretta Lake Resort was constructed with meetings in mind. Its 73,000-sq.-ft. conference center has 19 event and meeting rooms, with private terraces, walkout balconies and lake views. It’s certified by the International Association of Conference Centers, which means it meets strict requirements for facilities and services.

It was the perfect site for the Children’s Museum of Houston executive board retreat last September. “We wanted to get in a setting where we could clear our minds and focus on something new and different and not stifle creativity,” says Lori Gunningham, museum administrator. “We wanted to be able to think outside the box so we went away from the box. And we came out of there with pages and pages of notes and ideas.”

Theme parks and resorts are also tailor-made for special events. La Torretta has a sandy beach, which has proven perfect for receptions. It can be decorated with tiki torches for a clambake or a Hawaiian-themed evening. At Hershey Park, the property has seven separate catering areas. Attendees are free to come and go during a specified period. Menus can vary from hamburgers and hot dogs to barbecue ribs or a luau. “It’s like going to a banquet at a hotel,” said Kevin Grant, sales manager for the park. “But it’s more of a

fun atmosphere.” And at Rancho Las Palmas, groups often plan an evening outdoor event. “We’ll do a reception in the middle of the fifth fairway with uplit palm trees,” sales director Keyser says. “Groups love to rent that place out.”

Some venues are also perfect for team building and bonding. Big Cedar Lodge has scavenger hunts around the lake, which require groups to work together. At Wilderness at the Smokies Resort, groups have been known to organize impromptu surfing contests at the park’s wave area. But don’t think the appeal is just limited to children. “I’ve talked to a 70-year-old man who told me he tried every ride,” says Dottie Clabough, director of group sales. And even if guests choose not to brave the Storm Chaser waterslide, they can sit in the hot tub, or stretch out on a lounge chair to read a book — or a meeting handout.

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