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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

## How Secure Is Your Meeting's Data?

Experts Reveal Alarming Vulnerabilities

PAGE 18

## Focus on Small Meetings

They're Taking a Bigger Slice Out of the Group Business Pie

PAGE 28



# The Gen Y Factor

Millennials Are 'Leading the Charge' for Meeting Innovations

PAGE 32

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Pharma Meetings

California

Europe

# Destination

Experiencing a destination as a local, not a tourist, is certainly a trend in leisure travel, and one that has impacted corporate group travel. Accordingly, planners often seek to create offsite events that immerse participants in the local culture and make them feel part of it. When meeting in California, it's natural to try to capture the laidback, West Coast lifestyle, and a reception held at Grapevine, Texas-based GameStop's Expo 2014 in Anaheim succeeded in that regard.

## Anaheim

The Anaheim Convention Center's new Grand Plaza, spanning 100,000 sf, was converted into a casual setting for attendees to sample classic street fare, mingle, relax and enjoy the Southern California weather.

Credit: Janey Photography



# California

What's New for Meetings From SoCal to SanFran

"We had around 4,000 attendees for our main arrival day on Sunday, and instead of having box lunches or lunch in a ballroom, we decided to have a little fun with it, and we had the convention center secure food trucks," relates Judy Anderson, CMP, director of meetings and travel with GameStop.

"The convention center has a partnership with the food trucks, so the event went toward my F&B minimum. It was extremely well-received. Our attendees were able to sit out in the California sun and shop around at the different food trucks; we gave everybody food tickets and drink tickets. We had lounge chairs and tables set up throughout the Grand Plaza, as well as entertainment, a PlayStation truck and a stage with contests. It created this kind of organic sense of camaraderie."

Like several convention centers in California, the Anaheim Convention Center plans to expand, and by early 2017, an additional 200,000 sf of meeting space will be available. "The size now is perfect for what we do," Anderson says. "But we're excited about the expansion because we're always looking to grow."

The center's 7,500-seat arena also was a nice fit for the GameStop group, which used that facility for the program's three daily general sessions. The meeting space itself "is very well laid out, 'stacked' with a lot of common areas and very easy to maneuver in," she adds. "They also have a lot of outdoor meeting space that we use for all of our evening networking events, VIP receptions, award-winner receptions and so on." She adds, "They're upgrading their Wi-Fi, which we're also very excited about." By the end of the year, the Anaheim Convention Center will boast 10 gigabit Internet connectivity thanks to a \$2.5 million investment and partnership with Smart City Networks.

The center's proximity to hotels and restaurants was a big selling point, Anderson notes. GameStop used both the 1,572-room Hilton Anaheim (140,000 sf of function space) and the 1,300-room Anaheim Marriott (100,000 sf) as headquarters hotels.

GameStop's Expo brought 4,000 attendees to the Anaheim Convention Center where they enjoyed outdoor events on the Grand Plaza.

It's fair to say the city's Resort District is booming with a nearly \$200 million investment by major hoteliers to bring more than 1,500 guest rooms on line by the end of this year. Last year saw the opening of the 178-room Hyatt Place Anaheim Resort and two SpringHill Suites by Marriott (172 and 120 rooms, respectively). This year will see the opening of the 262-room Hyatt House Anaheim Resort, 274-room Residence Inn, 215-room Homewood Suites by Hilton - Anaheim Convention Center/Disneyland Main Gate, 96-room Holiday Inn Express and 221-room Courtyard Waterpark Hotel At Disneyland. Additionally, the Hilton Anaheim, Anaheim Marriott and Sheraton Park Hotel are undergoing \$53 million in renovations expected to be completed by year's end.

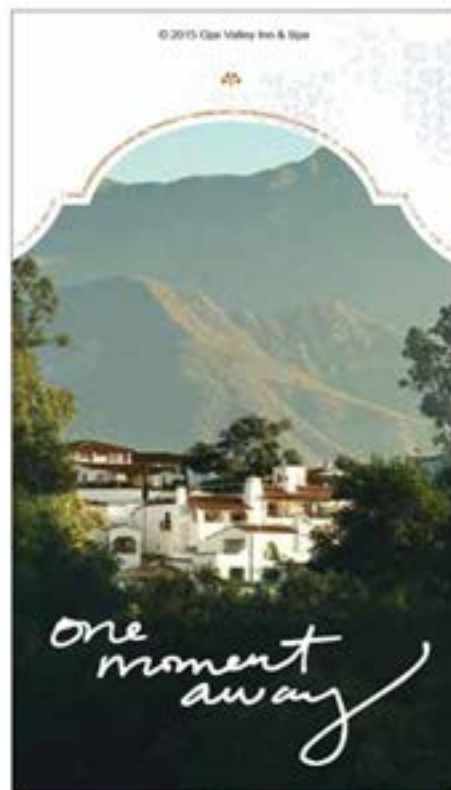
## San Diego

Unlike the Anaheim Convention Center expansion project, San Diego's is still at the proposal stage, and no construction is scheduled to take place prior to 2016. The phase three plan would add approximately 200,000-225,000 sf of exhibit space, 100,000 sf of meeting space and an 80,000-sf ballroom.

Portland, Oregon-based Johnstone Supply, an HVAC wholesale distributor, held its Spring Sales Meeting and Tradeshow at the San Diego Convention Center in March, and previously in 2010 and 2012. With 1,200 attendees, the event does not require the added space the expansion would bring, but Janet Tipton, communications director with the company, sees these projects as beneficial nonetheless.

"We're kind of that awkward size where we don't fit nicely into a hotel per se, yet we don't need the entire convention center. But I think that any time a city is investing in its infrastructure, it's going to be positive for all sizes of meetings," she explains.

While San Diego is sometimes perceived as a rather expensive destination, Tipton has not found that to be the case. "When you compare San Diego with other cities in the West, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Phoenix



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OJAI VALLEY INN & SPA

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The Ojai Valley Inn & Spa is a scenic meeting oasis tucked away in Southern California's Ojai Valley.

to change, however. The first phase of its renovation plan will be complete in July, including a refined lobby design with tablet check-in, an upgraded adult pool, a new Italian signature restaurant and a refreshed parlor concept at the Neff Lounge, a cornerstone of the property since 1923. The second phase of the renovation will begin in early 2016.

## Off California's Beaten Paths

As the nation's third-largest state, California is home to both major cities and a great deal of rural enclaves and natural environs, from Laguna Beach to Death Valley to Redwood National Park. Planners sometimes want a resort that is removed from the metropolitan areas, one that offers a retreat for participants, and there is no shortage of options.

### Scenic Natural Surroundings

One example is Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, located in Southern California's Ojai Valley, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles. The AAA Five Diamond, 308-room resort offers 35,000 sf of function space, the 31,000-sf Spa Ojai and a George Thomas-designed golf course that dates from 1923. Evelyn Morgan, Microsoft's director of operations and citizenship for Southern California, found the property's location an asset for a kickoff sales meeting for the new fiscal year. The scenic natural surroundings provided a memorable setting for the 300 or so salespeople, leaders and industry partners to convene. "You're

in this valley with the mountains surrounding you, and you can see deer running through the golf course," Morgan describes. "It allows you to relax instead of in a big city hotel where there's traffic. When you're able to create that kind of an environment, it brings the meeting to a different level."

In order to allow attendees to appreciate the views of Ojai Valley, Morgan organized a welcome reception complete with a disc jockey at one of the pool areas, which was closed off for the event. "I found the staff very willing to make some modifications to the menu based on dietary needs," she says. "The property has been owned by a family for a long time and so you have a stability that shows in management and in the staff. At investment properties that are sold again and again, what you might experience one year doesn't necessarily transfer to the following year. At Ojai I'm still dealing with the same director of sales, GM and conference services people the several times I've been there."

Ojai Valley Inn is certainly not averse

### Removed From City Life

While Loews Coronado Bay Resort is located in San Diego, it also is removed from city life, though in a different way than Ojai. Situated on its own 15-acre peninsula, the 439-room resort offers views of the Pacific Ocean and Mexico on one side, and the San Diego skyline on the other. Pleasanton, California-based Zeltiq, a medical technology company, held its global sales meeting for about 215 attendees at the Loews.

"We look for resort-style properties for this particular meeting, but we also look for properties that are a little bit removed from the prime location in a destination," notes Kimberly Coleman, CMPR senior event manager. "The reason the Loews was such a good fit for us is because it is not in downtown San Diego and not in the main area of Coronado. So we keep our team on-property; they don't have as much desire or access to go off-property." Loews Coronado Bay Resort offers 65,000 sf of function space, and Coleman found the layout of the indoor meeting space very convenient: "The meeting rooms are in proximity to each other, only on two levels and very compact." — PS

and Las Vegas, San Diego is actually very competitive," she remarks. The city's CVB is certainly an added value, she says. "One of the nice things about the San Diego CVB is that they do a great job with social media, so you're constantly getting specific, useful updates about new things that are happening. I find their communications are really spot on for planners. They're also a great resource for any third-party referrals, such as DMCs and photographers." The city's suppliers now have even more credibility with planners: More than 200 salespeople representing hotels, restaurants, venues, attractions and other service providers registered for the first session of San Diego Meeting Certified, a six-month course custom-designed

by Terri Roberts, director of training and communication for Destination Marketing Association International. The program just graduated its 2014 inaugural class.

Overall, Tipton has found San Diego to be a "very visitor friendly" city where "you don't have to create a lot of specific things for your attendees to do because it's very self-service. They can find things to do on their own, such as great restaurants and shopping, and the downtown is very walkable and safe."

Nonetheless, Johnstone Supply did host an organized off-site event at the USS Midway Museum this year that included dinner, docent tours and fireworks. The historic naval aircraft carrier accommodates private events for up to 3,500 guests,