



## Ann Shepphird: On Assignment

### Monterey's Turn for Meetings

From the famous seaside cliffs of Big Sur to the verdant hills of the Carmel Valley, Monterey County is filled with so much natural beauty that it can be easy to miss just how much is being added to its meetings infrastructure. Or, at least it used to be easy to miss. On a recent tour through the greater Monterey area, I found new offerings at almost every turn.

The biggest news—and the hardest project to miss—is the more than \$60 million renovation of the Monterey Conference Center in downtown Monterey. Less a renovation and more a complete transformation, the project has gutted the building so that the interior space could be reconfigured to make way for a new two-story glass entryway and a second-floor ballroom. The improvements are expected to offer more flexible meeting space, more usable pre-function areas, more advanced technology and the ability to host multiple gatherings in a LEED-certified building when it reopens next spring.

The adjacent Portola Hotel & Spa, which shares a wall with the center, is staying open throughout the construction but will be undergoing a renovation of its lobby level this summer. The project is expected to update and refresh the public areas and the food-and-beverage outlets of the lobby and increase the LEED-certified hotel's green initiatives when it is completed this fall. It follows a renovation of the bathrooms in the hotel's 379 guest rooms. Together with the Monterey Marriott (located on the other side of the conference center), the Portola Hotel and Monterey Conference Center market themselves as the Monterey Conference Connection. The three properties offer 70,000 square feet of meeting space, 19,150 square feet of exhibition space and 700 hotel rooms in a downtown area that is also transforming with new restaurants and other offerings.

Located on the Del Monte Golf Course, the Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel & Spa recently completed a multi-year renovation of its meeting space that included a complete refurbishment of its ballrooms and the addition of new technology and production options.

Out at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, Aramark has been adding a number of new offerings since becoming the concessionaire of the state-owned property in 2009. Included in the renovations were updates to two of the historic Julia Morgan–designed buildings: the Crocker Dining Hall (which received a kitchen remodel) and the Hearst Social Hall (which added a grab-and-go-style eatery). Also included were a slew of updates to the technological capabilities, new eco-friendly features and the addition of ADA-compliant pathways and guest rooms. A larger guest-room renovation is part of the future plans.

Two long-time attractions in Monterey are also available as event space. The Monterey Bay Aquarium, which opened more than 30 years ago, not only offers unique space for gatherings but through its Seafood Watch program has helped venues all over the world focus more on sustainability. Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, which opened in 1957, hosts five world-class race weekends each season but is available the rest of the year for a variety of events.

