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GETTING CENTERED

Monterey and Santa Cruz inspire with distinctive group facilities and experiences

BY MARIA LENHART

Within easy reach of California's largest urban centers, Monterey and Santa Cruz offer not only convenience, but a restorative atmosphere where organizations can recharge and find inspiration. Along with some of the state's most glorious coastal and mountain scenery, groups will also find sophisticated conference facilities, imaginative teambuilding options, abundant outdoor activities and other ingredients for a great meeting experience.

Monterey

In Monterey County, the biggest news is January's grand reopening of the Monterey Conference Center, following a two-year, \$60 million renovation that turned the 40-year-old facility into a modern LEED-certified venue featuring over 40,000 square feet of flexible meeting space with a capacity of 3,200 people.

"This is not a renovation, but a transformation," said Mark McMinn, vice president of sales for the Monterey County CVB. "We took the existing space and reconfigured it for today's meetings. For example, the Steinbeck Ballroom, which was an amphitheater, was leveled out to create a multi-space ballroom that provides for much greater flexibility."

The entire facility was taken back to the studs and rebuilt, resulting in not only more flexibility, but capacity, he added.

"Literally, everything is brand new—the air walls, the windows, the escalators and bathrooms," McMinn said. "It's wired for today's meetings with built-in Wi-Fi and

audiovisual. There are loading docks on both floors and higher ceilings. We also added some breakout rooms, giving us more square footage than we had before."

A big advantage of the renovation is that the conference center is now more conducive for hosting multiple groups, according to McMinn.

"Now we have the ability to do more than one meeting at time, with a group on one level and another on the second level," he said.

McMinn said the conference center is targeting meetings in the range of 800 to 1,000 attendees.

"We can do more, but that's our sweet spot," he said. "You will own downtown Monterey with a group of that size."

The downtown facility is connected to the Monterey Marriott and adjacent to the Portola Hotel & Spa, which recently completed a \$10 million renovation. In combination with the conference center, these properties offer 85,000 square feet of meeting space, 19,150 square feet of exhibit space and 700 guest rooms.

"When the conference center was closed, hotels had to focus on in-house business, primarily smaller association meetings," McMinn said. "Now we can start to entertain the citywide meeting that requires multiple properties, with the conference center as the hub."

To transform the facility, which opened in April 1977 and hosted the first-ever TED Conference in 1984, the City of Monterey hired Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to oversee the architectural design and engineering. The goal was to preserve the historic character of the building and surroundings, while modernizing it to suit contemporary needs, according to Michael Dunn, design director for SOM in San Francisco.

"The new conference center energizes the adjacent Portola Plaza and simultaneously embodies and facilitates connectedness—of people and ideas, of downtown businesses to waterfront amenities, and of a community to its future," he said.



MONTEREY CONFERENCE CENTER