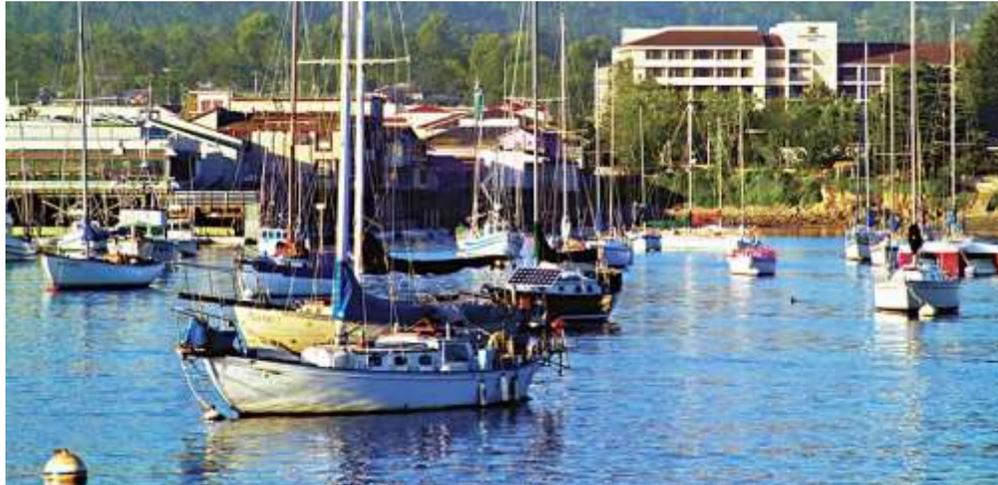


California Here We Come!

A Growing Meetings Infrastructure Gives Planners More Reasons to Head Out West

By Patrick Simms
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The waterfront Portola Hotel & Spa at Monterey Bay is adjacent to the Monterey Conference Center.

The Western Association of Chamber Executives (W.A.C.E.) had a broad choice of quality cities for its 2015 Annual Conference, given that it represents chamber professionals in 19 Western states and Canada. And with only about 400–450 attendees coming in for the three-day event, W.A.C.E. was not limited to major metropolises that can handle citywides. Danielle Fournier, director of meetings and events, remarks that the February time slot did help narrow down the possibilities to Southern California, where the weather would be pleasant. At that point, Anaheim stood out as a city that was both easy to get to from a major airport (SNA) and had numerous attractions and dining options to occupy delegates' free time. Among the recreational draws was, of course, Disneyland.

“We wanted our attendees to be in an environment that promoted innovative thinking and creativity, and that is exactly what we got (at Disneyland).” — Danielle Fournier

Anaheim

The Annual Conference “sold out weeks before the event; I’d love to say that it was our stellar program that allowed us to sell out quicker than ever before,” Fournier says, “but I think that being at Disney may have had something to do with it.” To fully showcase the theme park, the 973-room Disneyland Hotel, featuring 136,000 sf of function space, was selected as the conference site. “What set the Disneyland Hotel above the competition, for us, was that

we were not just getting hotel rooms and meeting space, we were getting an environment that sparks the imagination,” she explains. “We wanted our attendees to be in an environment that promoted innovative thinking and creativity, and that is exactly what we got.”

Indeed, when a destination offers a strong selling point such as a renowned theme park, it can be advantageous to stress that element: “We worked a little Disney magic into all aspects of the event,” Fournier relates, “from our session titles, to Disney characters greeting guests at registration (which was a big hit and energized the attendees from the very start), to our opening general session speaker from the Disney Institute and an evening outing to watch the Fantasmic! Show in the Disneyland Park. At the Fantasmic! Show we had a designated area set aside for our attendees, which allowed us all to be together to watch the show and network.”

While Disneyland Resort offers a multitude of resources for planners, it is but one of the assets that distinguishes California as a convention destination. The rich cultural diversity of cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, the scenic coastal getaways of Long Beach, Monterey and San Diego, and the entrepreneurial spirit of San Jose are among the virtues of the state. Combined with some of the country’s most forward-thinking convention centers (including the Anaheim Convention Center, with a major 200,000-sf expansion due for completion in 2017), California is better positioned today in the association meetings market than ever before.

Long Beach

In terms of popular attractions, Anaheim is arguably in a class by itself among California’s cities thanks to Disneyland. But from a historical perspective, Long Beach is a strong draw due to the Queen Mary, which had its maiden voyage on May 27, 1936, and has been docked in Long Beach since 1967. The ship offers group tours and more than 80,000 sf of meeting and exhibit space in 14 art deco salons; the 70,000-sf Queen Mary Dome also is available. New aboard the Queen Mary is the multimillion-dollar Princess Diana Exhibit, which includes approximately 2,000 items relating to the Windsor family, including nine of her dresses and gowns, and handwritten letters from all the major royals.

The city’s primary meeting facility, the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center, has undergone a \$40 million renovation of its public spaces, meeting rooms and the 3,000-seat Terrace Theatre. With more than 400,000 sf of function space, including 224,000 sf of contiguous exhibit space, the 20,456-sf Grand Ballroom and 34 meeting rooms, the convention center is a formidable option for association groups. Long Beach Arena, featuring the Pacific Room with state-of-the-art AV, is yet another option in the complex.

Several of the city’s hotels also have undergone renovations in recent years, including the Renaissance Long Beach Hotel, which features 374 redesigned rooms after an \$8 million renovation completed last year. The hotel offers 21,000 sf of meeting space. In addition, Hotel Maya, a Doubletree Hotel by Hilton, has opened its \$1.4 million “Lagunita” pavilion. Sitting on the water’s edge of Queensway Bay, the 6,400-sf special event space affords

panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean, the downtown Long Beach skyline and the Queen Mary. Surrounding the Lagunita pavilion is the Vista del Mar plaza, a 10,000-sf outdoor prefunction area featuring towering palm trees, water and fire displays, custom outdoor furniture, a permanent outdoor stage and alfresco bar. The 197-room Hotel Maya offers 30,000 sf of meeting space.

Los Angeles

The \$10 million renovation plan for the Los Angeles Convention Center is making good progress: A city panel recently selected the design by the team of Populous and HMC Architects over two competitors. Design features include a new structure over Pico Boulevard connecting the South Hall and West Hall; multiple floors of meeting spaces lining an open-air courtyard; and a new large outdoor ballroom space complementing the West Hall. The city's hotel inventory also is developing with 17 new properties under construction and another 22 in final planning stages countywide; the 39 projects will deliver more than 7,900 new guest rooms. Among the new builds are the 900-room Wilshire Grand Center, opening in 2017, and the 755-room expansion of the JW Marriott Los Angeles L.A. Live. When combined with the existing property and attached Ritz-Carlton Los Angeles, the L.A. Live entertainment district will offer 1,756 upscale rooms and more than 200,000 sf of function space by 2018. Also, the Los Angeles International Airport is undergoing a multibillion-dollar modernization program projected to last through 2019.

The smaller the convention, the more flexibility it has in terms of site options, and some groups may be able to gather in one of the most famous towns in Los Angeles County and in the state: Beverly Hills, home to the Rodeo Drive shopping district. A fine property choice here is The Beverly Hilton, which celebrated its 60th anniversary in August. The hotel offers 569 rooms and 60,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

Its luxurious ambience was well-suited to the approximately 700 attendees of the Pension Real Estate Association's Institutional Investor Real Estate Conference, which convenes CEOs and senior managers of leading institutional investor firms. "We have continued to partner with the hotel for over two decades because the general management and entire hotel staff are consummate professionals, always willing to go the extra mile to make sure our events are successful," notes Gail C. Haynes, PREA president. "Their excellence and professionalism extend to the personalized service they offer to our attendees as guests of the hotel. It is a pleasure to see the same familiar faces each time we return and a strong indication of the hotel's retention of talented staff." The staff showed its competence in supporting former President Bill Clinton's address to the group. "His advisors and security staff put in last-minute requests for an array of new room assignments and logistical equipment," Haynes relates. "The hotel accommodated these requests with poise and professionalism."

She also highlights several of the hotel's function spaces: "The outdoor pool space is uniquely appealing, an outstanding place in which to hold opening receptions. We also love the tiered organization of the International Ballroom. The well-designed and comfortable smaller meeting spaces accommodate our breakout sessions very effectively. And the Stardust Room is perfect for our board meetings and other VIP events." The Stardust Room

features a built-in stage with dance floor, built-in house sound, full-service kitchen and audio-visual capabilities to support a reception of up to 250 and a banquet of 200. The private outdoor terrace can accommodate up to 150 and offers views of the city, including the iconic Hollywood sign.

Monterey County

Great venues can sometimes be attendance boosters, and Monterey County has demonstrated that its aquarium has that ability. When the California Association of Highway Patrolmen meets in the county and hosts its main event at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, attendance well exceeds the usual 450 and approaches 650, notes the organization's office manager/meeting and event planner, Cyndee Keroher. "The first year that we did it we rented a portion of the aquarium; the last two years we rented the entire aquarium. As a venue it just can't be beat. No sooner do I finish that conference than I'm getting requests for us to go back," Keroher observes. Attendees take in the venue's 35,000 plants and animals while enjoying a strolling dinner, with three different bars set up and tables throughout the aquarium. "I also have little vignettes going on, whether it's a photo vignette, a live band or a guitarist in different parts of the aquarium," she adds.

The Portola Hotel & Spa has hosted the California Association of Highway Patrolmen for several of the organization's Monterey meetings. The 379-room resort goes the extra mile to logistically assist planners, in Keroher's experience. "For one of our smaller meetings we just had, Portola helped us coordinate (an outing) to the Sardine Factory (an award-winning local restaurant), so they're very willing to help with those types of things," she says. "Monterey in general is a great draw for our attendees, but equally important is the feeling that at the Portola you're wanted and welcomed by the entire staff, from bellhop to audio-visual to housekeeping, and when I say that I mean it's beyond the sales relationship." Offsite, the group also has enjoyed shopping along Cannery Row, visiting the Carmel Mission and the Wine Trolley Tour.

The Portola Hotel & Spa's 50,000 sf of meeting space is adjacent to the Monterey Conference Center, which will debut its renovated first floor by late summer 2016, with the grand opening for the \$45 million modernization taking place in early 2017.

San Diego

A phase three expansion of the San Diego Convention Center, which would increase the facility's capacity by 33 percent, is currently under consideration. But the facility is quite sizable as it stands, with a 525,701-sf exhibit hall, 90,000-sf Sails Pavilion, 204,114 sf of meeting rooms and 184,514 sf of outdoor terraces. Planners who are looking for smaller properties to add to their room block will note the August opening of the new Courtyard San Diego Gaslamp/Convention Center. The 90-room hotel is located just four blocks from the convention center and includes The Nolem, a rooftop bar and lounge.

Part of San Diego's charm is its beaches, waterways and bays, and this fall, Paradise Point Resort & Spa, A Destination Hotel, will debut the 16,000-sf Sunset Pavilion overlooking Mission Bay. Accommodating up to 1,800 attendees, the new pavilion brings the 462-room resort's total meeting space to more than 80,000 sf.

Another luxury property that lets groups enjoy San Diego's vistas is Loews Coronado Bay Resort. Perched on its own 15-acre peninsula, the 439-room hotel was the site of the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy's 2015 Western Regional Meeting, which brought in about 180 delegates.

While San Diego is sometimes perceived as a rather expensive destination, Angela Layton, CMP, CMM, senior meeting planner with the association, notes that the Loews Coronado Bay Resort was very accommodating to the meeting budget. "We are pretty price-conscious as far as our room rates are concerned, and they were able to meet our need for enough space as well as getting within the room rate requirement," she says. "And then during our contract negotiations they also were willing to work with us to set parameters on F&B, including cost per meal." In addition, the hotel provided a free shuttle bus to local points of interest such as the Gaslamp Quarter. Another highlight was a dinner on the Coronado Bay beach, catered by the hotel.

The hotel's 65,000 sf of function space features thoughtful design elements. "What I liked about the meeting space was that the lobby area has floor-to-ceiling windows with a beautiful view of the bay. I think it really helped people to feel as though they were connected with the water and surroundings," she says. "Sometimes we get into spaces that could be Anywhere, USA. The hotel also has some nice pool areas outside where we did our welcome reception for about 220 people, including our guests."

San Francisco

Further testament to California's commitment to the convention industry comes from San Francisco, where the Moscone Center expansion broke ground this summer. When it is completed in fall of 2018, the North and South buildings will offer more than 500,000 sf of contiguous space that can be used for exhibitions and/or meetings, almost double the amount of space currently offered in its largest hall. The new and improved Moscone will feature three ballrooms (including a new 50,000-sf, column-free ballroom), more than 80 meeting rooms, 108,000 sf of prefunction space affording panoramic views of the city and the surrounding Yerba Buena Gardens, and more than 20,000 sf of outdoor terraces. In addition, the expanded facility is designed to garner the highest LEED certification possible.

Yerba Buena Gardens, currently commemorating the 15th anniversary season of its festival, is more than a two-block oasis in downtown San Francisco. It is an event space with numerous rentable venues for groups, from the 1,800-sf Carousel Plaza to the 340,000-sf Esplanade, accommodating 5,000 participants standing (1,000 seated). It also is surrounded by many of the city's cultural institutions, such as the Contemporary Jewish Museum, Museum of the African Diaspora, Children's Creativity Museum and the California Historical Society.

Complementing the Moscone Center project, San Francisco also is making strides on the upscale lodging front. In February, Hilton acquired Parc 55 Wyndham San Francisco – Union Square and renamed it Parc 55 San Francisco, a Hilton Hotel. The 1,024-room property features more than 30,000 sf of function space. The adjacent 1,919-room Hilton San Francisco Union Square, with 134,000 sf of meeting space, completed a multimillion-dollar upgrade of 575 Tower 1 guest rooms in May. The city's newest hotel is the Park Central Hotel San Francisco, situated in the city's epicenter just off Market Street in the SOMA culture and arts district. The 681-room hotel houses 23,000 sf of meeting space, including the 9,040-sf Metropolitan Ballroom.

San Jose

The capital of Silicon Valley is home to 6,600 technology companies, and as such, the "Wickedly Fast Free Wi-Fi" it offers delegates is no surprise. Billed as the nation's best free Wi-Fi experience, the service extends from Mineta San Jose International Airport to downtown San Jose and the San Jose McEnery Convention Center. San Jose also is on the forefront of sustainability: Team San Jose-managed facilities are reported to recycle, reuse and repurpose 89 percent of all material waste.

The recently expanded San Jose McEnery Convention Center houses a total of 367,526 sf of flexible space. A new property just steps away from the center is the 171-room Westin San Jose, the second Silicon Valley Hotel from West Hotels & Resorts. Also of note, the 808-room Fairmont San Jose recently completed a sweeping \$524,000 upgrade to the hotel's main building breakout rooms; the property houses a total of 65,000 sf of function space.

San Jose also offers groups numerous intriguing offsite event venues. New options include the 18,000-seat Avaya Stadium; the 12,000-sf GlassHouse, featuring downtown's largest outdoor patio; and ThirdSpace Fitness in a historic building, for smaller groups. Culturally attuned attendees have plenty of free-time options in the city, including San Pedro Square Market, Plaza de Cesar Chavez, San Jose Museum of Art and the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum of Art & Planetarium. **AC&F**