



Photo courtesy of Naples, Marco Island & The Everglades CVB

By Steve Winston

Perception issues in the meetings industry are one thing, but when they arise in the broader tourism industry of a state heavily dependent upon this revenue source, the climate can turn decidedly cloudy.

That's why, in the wake of the BP Gulf oil spill disaster, Florida has fought hard to dispel the misbegotten perception that all 1,260 miles of coastline were ever in peril. As the well-informed are aware, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, even in the vulnerable Gulf Coast region of northwestern Florida's Panhandle, most of the beaches stayed open throughout the crisis. President Obama did his part in August to promote "business as usual" by bringing the First Family to Panhandle beaches for a short vacation, swimming in the ocean and cruising aboard the 50-foot Bay Point Lady in Panama City Beach and enjoying the sight of porpoises swimming nearby.

Meeting planners can confidently echo the president's supportive sentiment to their prospective attendees: Come on in, the water's fine. VisitFlorida confirms, "All of the Sunshine State's 825 miles of beaches and 1,260 miles of coastline are 'Open for Business.' We invite you to see for yourself on Florida Live at VisitFlorida.com."

No manner of man-made or natural calamity will ever change Florida's long history of hosting international groups and major events such as Super Bowls and national political conventions. As a result,

there's an outstanding meetings infrastructure in place.

Florida also offers a tremendous diversity of meeting places, of course, from booming cities to natural wonders, along with world-class restaurants, shopping and unmatched golf. And this state has two other things no other destination can match: the most spectacular beaches in the world, and the greatest array of attractions in the world.

Planners, however, know the Sunshine State as a place that offers genuine value. This destination understands that — especially in recessionary times — there's competition for the meetings dollar. And it's not in the game to lose.

From top to bottom — some 600 miles — each part of the state offers a very unique charm...

Destin

Destin anchors a 150-mile strand of white-sand beaches called The Emerald Coast, in the northwest Florida Panhandle. There are 16,000 hotel rooms in Okaloosa County, and total meeting space of 117,000 square feet, nearly a third of which is in the Emerald Coast Conference Center in Fort Walton Beach. The Emerald Grande Resort, overlooking Destin Harbor, has 280 suites and condos, along with meeting space for 250 people. The Palms of Destin Resort & Conference Center has 416 suites and condos, and can host 400 meeting participants. The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, located within the 2,400-acre Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort community, has 600 guest rooms and more than 32,000 square feet of meeting space.

Unusual meeting spaces include the Gulfarium aquarium and Big Kahuna's Adventure & Water Park. And up to 150 attendees can board the 80-foot, glass-bottom Southern Star Dolphin Cruise to watch playful porpoises, feed birds and revel in the Gulf's spectacular sunsets.

For dinner, Harbor Walk Village boasts restaurants such as Pat O'Brien's and Harry T's.

Tampa/St. Pete

If you're looking for major-league meeting space, look at the Tampa Bay Convention Center, a state-of-the-art facility (600,000 square feet of space) right on the water.

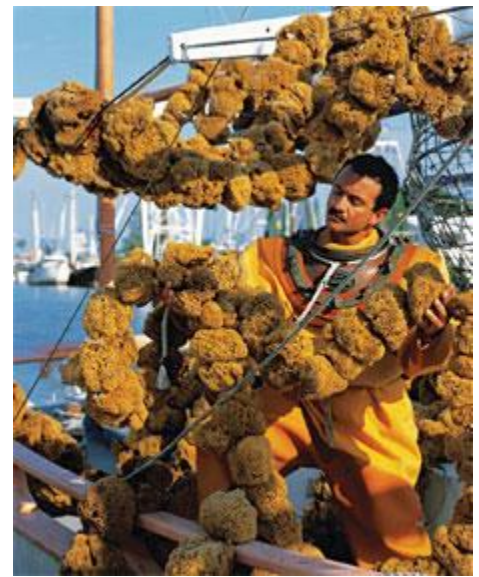
Tampa, which will play host to the 2012 Republican National Convention, has more than 21,000 hotel guest rooms. Among the hotels with generous meeting spaces are the 719-room Tampa Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina with 50,000 square feet of meeting space; and the Saddlebrook Resort, renowned for its golf and spa, with 800 rooms and 95,000 square feet of meeting space. The Westin Tampa Bay Airport, which opened last year, has 255 guest rooms and 6,800 square feet for meetings. In the heart of the city is the InterContinental Tampa, with 323 guest rooms and 17,000 square feet of meeting space, which includes a 40-seat meetings amphitheater.

After-meeting fun? Tampa Bay boasts one of America's premier attractions, Busch Gardens, as well as Ybor City, restored to its previous splendor as an 1890s Cuban neighborhood of gaslit street lamps, quaint buildings, cigar shops where they still roll them by hand, and unique shops and restaurants. For the quintessential Tampa dining experience, try Bern's Steak House, where the steaks are legendary and the wine cellar is superb.

Twenty minutes from Tampa International Airport is Clearwater Beach, which welcomed the new Hyatt Regency Clearwater Beach Resort & Spa earlier this year. It's the centerpiece of Beach Walk, a new \$30 million revitalization project featuring a half-mile pathway for shopping, dining and entertainment. The hotel has 250 one- and two-bedroom suites and 30,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor event space.

Thirty minutes from Tampa is St. Petersburg, boasting seven miles of waterfront parks. Also on the waterfront is the Salvador Dali Museum, where groups can enjoy a private fête amidst the world's most comprehensive collection of the Spanish surrealist artist's works. The Pier, on Tampa Bay, is a five-story inverted pyramid-shaped landmark, which features an aquarium, shops, restaurants and more.

For beachside meetings, planners can look to The Tradewinds Island Grand Resort, fronting the Gulf of Mexico on St. Pete Beach. The resort is currently undergoing a \$10 million interior facelift to be completed in phases so guests are undisturbed. Renovation of all 584 guest rooms — featuring an upscale British West Indies décor — is slated for completion by late 2011. Together with the Tradewinds Sandpiper next door, the



North of St. Petersburg is the Greek village of Tarpon Springs, the “sponge capital of the world.”

Photo courtesy of Visit St. Pete/Clearwater

“The atmosphere at Hammock Beach is perfect for us. ...The all-suite concept, which features a central living room, allowed our attendees to continue bouncing around ideas after the meetings ended. And as a planner, you can't ask for much more than that.”

Brenda Randolph, Event Planner
MarketSource
Alpharetta, GA



Tradewinds Island Grand Resort provides 84,000 square feet of function space.

Southwest Coast

If you hold any events on a Sip 'n' Sail cruise in Naples, you'll see why this area is called the Paradise Coast. Sip 'n' Sail charters boats, lays out a spread of wonderful hors d'oeuvres and wines from around the world, and takes groups on sunset cruises past islands populated only by egrets and ospreys, to waters dappled with the changing colors of the sun as it goes down over the Gulf of Mexico.

There are 8,000 hotel rooms in Collier County and 502,000 square feet of meeting space. The queen of Naples resorts is the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club (318 rooms, 34,000 square feet for meetings — plus beachfront outdoor event space — and great golf), which has recently undergone a major renovation. Its HB's on the Ocean restaurant serves memorable seafood and inspirational views of Gulf sunsets. Downtown, the elegant Inn on Fifth (87 guest rooms) sits amidst the shops and restaurants of Fifth Avenue South, and its 10,000 square feet of meeting space ranges from outdoor terraces to executive meeting rooms. The Inn on Fifth's McCabe's Irish Pub & Grill is one of the liveliest places in town. Ridgway Bar & Grill, on Third Street South, serves superb American cuisine.

Orlando

When it comes to meetings infrastructure, Orlando is on the fast track. The city positions itself as "Where Creative Minds Meet," hosting more than 10 million meeting attendees and business travelers a year in 115,000 hotel rooms among 450 hotels. The Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) is the

second-largest in America with 2.1 million square feet, including more than 400,000 square feet dedicated to meeting rooms. Opening this fall is the Amway Center, new home of the National Basketball Association's Orlando Magic, with 20,000 seats and some 300,000 square feet available for meetings. The CVB reports that just since the beginning of 2010, more than 500 meetings, conventions and trade shows (bringing in 1 million attendees) have been booked for future Orlando dates at convention centers, hotels and venues. What's more, Orlando will host the Professional Convention Management Association's 2013 Annual Meeting; Destination Marketing Association International's 2013 Annual Convention; the International Association of Exhibitions and Events' 2012 annual meeting and Meeting Professionals International's 2011 World Education Congress.

Gary Sain, president and CEO of the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau recently noted, "Orlando is currently enjoying more than \$4 billion worth of infrastructure projects. From our first-of-its kind 'medical city' to our new Waldorf Astoria hotel, and from The Peabody Orlando expansion to our new Amway Center, opening later this year, Orlando is growing...and companies and associations are taking notice. Our new developments, combined with Orlando's outstanding value, accessibility and customer service, are providing great word-of-mouth and momentum."

Service to planners is a specialty. Jennifer Dienst, a spokesperson for the Orlando/Orange County CVB, said that Orlando now offers a dedicated convention marketing executive to any group that brings its meeting to Orlando.

"Complimentary service can include anything from using our graphic design department to designing a logo to sending e-mail blasts to brainstorming ideas on how to increase attendance. This is great for planners whose budgets have been slashed and can no longer afford a marketing professional."

Meetings property highlights in Orlando:

The Hilton Bonnet Creek (1,000 rooms; 122,000 square feet) and the Waldorf-Astoria (497; 28,000 square feet) opened adjacent to each other last year, sharing a world-class spa and a Rees Jones-designed golf course.

The much anticipated and newest addition to Orlando's meeting hotel inventory debuts this month: The landmark Peabody Orlando's \$450 million expansion. The new tower is seamlessly connected to the existing hotel and connects to the OCCC via covered walkway. The expanded property, which recently renovated all of its existing guest rooms, now offers a new total of 1,641 rooms and 300,000 square feet of flexible function space (the expansion's 150,000 square feet of new space opened in July). Amenities include the 22,000-square-foot Peabody Spa & Athletic Club, and 12 dining and entertainment options including a Napa Valley Wine-themed restaurant. Last but not least, attendees will delight in the daily parade of the Peabody ducks through the lobby.

The Hilton Orlando, which opened last fall, was the first hotel to connect by open-air walkway to the OCCC. The Hilton Orlando has 1,400 guest rooms and 175,000 square feet for meetings.

The 1,334-room Rosen Centre Hotel also will connect to the OCCC by pedestrian walkway in early 2011. Construction on the bridge begins this fall. Rosen Centre has 100,000 square feet of meeting space with tentative plans for an additional 50,000 to 100,000 square feet of meeting space by 2012. Rosen Shingle Creek, with 1,500 guest rooms and 445,000 square feet of meeting space, will be adding 300 to 500 luxury villas on 25 acres fronting Shingle Creek Golf Course. Contiguous to the Rosen College of Hospitality Management, the property will include a pool, restaurant, private check-in and registration desk, a private clubhouse and private meeting space. Rosen Plaza Hotel has 800 guest rooms and 60,000 square feet of meeting space. Long-range plans for Rosen Plaza call for an additional 400 to 700 guest rooms by 2016.

The five-star, 2,300-acre Reunion Resort features 400 luxury accommodations consisting of one-, two- and three-bedroom Key-West inspired villas and three- to eight-bedroom colonial-style homes. Reunion boasts three signature golf



The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, which opened in June at Universal Orlando Resort, is credited with boosting occupancy at Universal's Loews hotels to 97 percent.
Photo courtesy of Universal Orlando Resort

courses by legends Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson and Arnold Palmer. Women's golf great Annika Sorenstam heads the onsite Annika Academy, which offers individualized and group golf instruction, video swing analysis and Callaway Golf club fitting. There is a five-acre water park with a lazy river, 1,000-foot flume slide and interactive kids area. The indoor meeting space includes the 4,700-square-foot Heritage Center and 16,000-square-foot Reunion Grande Conference Center. The outdoor event space totals 10,500 square feet and ranges from the water park and pool pavilion to the Grande Event Lawn to Eleven's rooftop lounge.

As the result of its change to the Doubletree brand last year, the Doubletree Resort Orlando, International Drive has undergone a \$35 million renovation, and is now the brand's largest, with 1,094 guest rooms. There's more than 60,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space, including two ballrooms and the Tower Terrace, a tropically landscaped outdoor venue.

"Planners tell us that we offer the best of both worlds," said Larry Goldman, director of sales and marketing at the resort. "We have a 17-story tower for those who prefer a more-traditional hotel experience; and 19 two-story buildings for those who prefer something different."

The resort — located across the street from SeaWorld's new Aquatica water park, one mile from the OCCC, and near Universal Orlando Resort, Walt Disney World Resort and the airport — has a nine-hole golf course, three pools (one with a waterfall), a day spa and more. The Bamboo Grille features excellent Asian cuisine, and the Bangli Lounge is a great place for a late cocktail or light fare.

Orlando has made believers out of a lot of planners. Brian Savage is CEO of Fun Publications, a Fort Worth, TX company that manufactures and licenses merchandise for the popular Transformers and GI Joe brands, in addition to publishing magazines and websites. Fun Publications held its BotCon Transformers Convention at Walt Disney World Dolphin Resort in June, with more than 4,000 attendees and 200 exhibitors.

"People want to come to Orlando because it's Orlando," Brian Savage said. "And it's very reasonably priced...especially when you consider everything it offers."

He added that Orlando really knows how to do meetings. "Our people are delighted with the destination and with the Dolphin Resort," Savage said. "I'd recommend Orlando very highly as a business-meetings destination. "But I'd be sure to recommend, also, that nobody pick the dates we're interested in!"

Walt Disney World Resort is involved in the meetings business in a big way, with six meeting/convention properties offering a combined total of more than 5,300 guest rooms and 700,000 square feet of ballroom, meeting and function space. Among them is the 951-room Contemporary Resort, which last year completed a new 15-story tower. The Contemporary has 115,000 square feet of meeting space. The Disney Event Group offers five new ESPN-themed teambuilding and networking programs at their re-branded ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex (see page 25). Other new options on the way for meeting groups include a new 3-D Star Wars attraction coming in 2011; and a variety of new private event venues and entertainment located in the new Fantasyland expansion, which is slated for a 2013 opening.

Not to be outdone, Universal Orlando Resort just opened the wildly popular Wizarding World of Harry Potter, situated within the Islands of Adventure theme park. The new attraction offers a multitude of specialized opportunities, entertainment and menus for groups of all sizes. Three Loews Hotels at Universal Orlando Resort offer a combined 2,400 guest rooms and 133,000 square feet of meeting space. According to various news reports, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter has worked its magic on revenues for the three hotels, with each having seen as much as 97 percent occupancy since the \$200 million attraction opened. Universal Orlando's Blue Man Group may not be new, but the popularity of the blue men's distinctive theatrics never seems to wane with corporate groups, which can arrange customized performances.

Among the best of Orlando's 4,500 restaurants are Victoria & Albert's (in Disney's Grand Floridian) and Norman's (at the Ritz-Carlton Orlando).



A corporate group enjoys a reception on the River Deck at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront on the St. Johns River.

Photo courtesy of Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront

Northeast Coast

Jacksonville is a surprising — and very affordable — destination for meeting planners. In addition, because the city enjoys prominence as a center for medical meetings with its extensive network of world-class medical facilities, the meeting and convention staff at Visit Jacksonville are experienced at serving the needs of this specialized meetings segment.

For large groups, The Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center offers 160,000 square feet of flexible meeting space. And there are a variety of non-traditional meeting places, ranging from the Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens to the Ribault Club, a legendary watering hole for the privileged set in the Roaring '20s.

The largest meeting and convention hotel in the northeast Florida region is the 966-room Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, which offers 110,000 square feet of flexible exhibit and event space, including outdoor terraces and function space overlooking the St. Johns River.

Ponte Vedra Inn & Club in Ponte Vedra Beach, 20 miles southeast of Jacksonville, is a five diamond jewel established in 1928. The resort has 250 luxurious rooms and suites, most of which are oceanfront, 25,000 square feet of meeting space and two links-style golf courses.

In total, there are 22,500 guest rooms in the area, which also includes St. Augustine, the oldest permanent (non-Native) settlement in America; and beautiful Amelia Island with the Victorian town of Fernandina Beach. Amelia Island Plantation has 249 oceanview guest rooms; one-, two- and three-bedroom villas; 49,000 square feet of meeting space; and three championship golf courses. Omni Hotels & Resorts recently purchased the property and expects to take over full ownership and operation sometime this fall. The brand plans to expand Amelia Island Plantation with approximately 125 additional guest rooms and suites as well as a new 16,000-square-foot ballroom.

About an hour south is Palm Coast and the Hammock Beach Resort, situated along the Atlantic shoreline. All of the 330 units here are suites; all have ocean views; and all have balconies from which to take in those views. The resort sits along a quiet stretch of coastline. It has 50,000 square feet of

indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, as well as The Sundancer, a 117-foot event yacht. Amenities include The Spa at Hammock Beach, the signature Atlantic Grille restaurant and two of Florida's best golf courses: The Jack Nicklaus Signature Course has the most oceanfront holes — six — on the East Coast; and the Tom Watson Conservatory Course is one of the longest and most challenging in Florida.

"We're a classic-looking hotel," said Jason Kern, director of sales and marketing. "We don't do 'chic.' We have the ambience of a luxurious private club, with exposed wooden beams, warm colors, and a very homey feel. Yet, we're only six years old."

"The atmosphere at Hammock Beach is perfect for us," said Brenda Randolph, event planner/executive assistant at MarketSource, a third-party outsourcing company that provides personnel for companies such as HP and Best Buy, along with event-planning services. MarketSource held its Annual Leadership Meeting at Hammock Beach in February, with 120 attendees from all over the U.S. and Canada. And it will meet there again next January.

"We wanted a more personalized experience," said Randolph. "The all-suite concept, which features a central living room, allowed our attendees to continue bouncing around ideas after the meetings ended. And as a planner, you can't ask for much more than that.

"We're already looking forward to our January meeting there," Randolph added. "For us, it's a no-brainer."



Ocean Walk Village along Florida's only drivable beach, Daytona Beach, features more than 300,000 square feet of meeting space, 1,400 guest rooms and entertainment and dining to satisfy every attendee's tastes — all within six square blocks.

Photo courtesy of Daytona Beach CVB

Daytona Beach

Daytona Beach's Ocean Center has 54,000 square feet for meetings, and 160,000 for exhibits. There are 12,000 hotel rooms in the area, 2,000 of them within walking distance of the Ocean Center. The Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort is across the street, with 744 rooms and 60,000 square feet of meeting space. In all, there's more than 500,000 square feet of meeting space in the Daytona area. (And let's not forget the 23 miles of beach!)

"The meetings market is really important to us," said Sally Gardiner, director of convention sales for the Daytona Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. "So much so, in fact, that we now have a website specifically for meeting planners, www.daytonabeachmeetings.com. It's a great way of showing what we have here, and how planners can take advantage of it for their attendees."

The two anchors of this renowned beach are The Shores Resort & Spa, a four-star, four-diamond resort with 212 rooms and 20,000 square feet of meeting space, at the southern end; and the Daytona Beach Resort & Conference Center (322; 14,000) at the northern end.

If you're looking for meeting sites a bit out of the ordinary, Daytona has one of the best: the Daytona International Speedway can host up to 1,200 people. And if you're looking for a hot new restaurant, attendees — especially basketball fans — will love Vince Carter's, owned by the Orlando Magic basketball



TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach is the home of the PGA Tour's Players Championship.

Photo courtesy of St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches VCB

guest rooms, 65,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, and dining options ranging from haute cuisine to beachfront bites. The Boca Raton Resort boasts 1,043 guest rooms, nearly 146,000 square feet of total indoor/outdoor function space and a dozen dining options. And the oceanfront Jupiter Beach Resort has 159 rooms, 12,000 square feet of meeting space, a full-service spa, and great seafood at Sinclair's Ocean Grill.

PGA Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens is truly a golfer's paradise with five championship courses and an open-air pavilion overlooking The Masters practice green. In all, the 39,000 square feet of meeting space accommodates groups from 12 to 1,200 attendees. There are nine restaurants, nine pools and a 40,000-square-foot European spa at the 379-room resort, which last year underwent a comprehensive renovation.

Non-traditional meeting spaces? The Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens is filled with red wooden footbridges, ponds stocked with koi, bonsai trees, and wooded paths...and hosts

meetings of up to 300 people. Ragtops Motorcars features classic cars from the '40s to the '60s, a drive-in theater, a soda-shop and meeting space for 1,500.

Fort Lauderdale

In just a few decades, Fort Lauderdale has morphed from "Spring Break Central" into a vibrant, cosmopolitan city. And the Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center — with 600,000 square feet of meeting and exhibit space — is only minutes from the swanky shops and bistros of Las Olas Boulevard, and from the beach.

The world-class hotels here are typified by "Lauderdale Luxe," a group of beachfront hotels with excellent meeting facilities including the W Fort Lauderdale, which opened last year with 486 rooms, 12,000 square feet of indoor meeting space and more than 5,500 square feet of outdoor function space. The W offers both ocean and Intracoastal views. The nearby Ritz-Carlton features a gourmet restaurant called Via Luna.

The Westin Beach Resort has been totally rebuilt, with 32,000 square feet for meetings, 433 guest rooms and Shula's on the Beach, a restaurant owned by the legendary former coach of the Miami Dolphins. The 384-room Hyatt Regency Pier Sixty-Six Resort & Spa, another local landmark, has 25,000 square feet of meeting space that includes the revolving Pier Top, with spectacular views of the city.

Nearby Hollywood, FL, claims the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino. The Seminole Hard Rock has 500 guest rooms, 40,000 square feet of meeting space, the 5,500-seat Hard Rock Live indoor arena, 400-seat Paradise Live, three acres of gaming, 25 retail shops, 13 nightclubs, 17 dining venues and a European-style spa.

An ever-popular Fort Lauderdale nighttime magnet is Las Olas Boulevard, a European-style thoroughfare with world-class bistros, galleries and boutiques. Restaurants range from longtime favorites such as Café Europa to Timpano Chophouse & Martini Bar. And attendees can boogie the night away to live bands at the tropical Mangos Restaurant and Lounge.

Sue Fry, president of Homepagetx, LLC, in Carrollton, TX, is a third-party planner. She recently planned an annual sales meeting (300 attendees) for a global pharmaceutical firm at the Hyatt Regency Bonaventure Conference Center & Spa, about 15 miles west of Fort Lauderdale.

"Fort Lauderdale's very accessible," Fry said, "and, of course, it's a very desirable destination. The CVB is very focused on 'green' practices; they actually give you gift bags recycled from their signage at various trade shows. And, regarding meetings, this destination really 'gets it.' They're surprisingly reasonable in their pricing."

The Hyatt Regency Bonaventure's location allows easy access to Sawgrass Mills, one of America's largest shopping malls. And the Grand Lux Cafe at Sawgrass Mills became a favorite after-meeting spot.

Fry believes that despite the sluggish economic recovery, some properties in other prime destinations are reluctant to lower prices. "Fort Lauderdale, though, is proactive," she said. "They're willing to do what it takes."

Miami

player who's a native of this area.

"Locals describe it as a 'sports bar on steroids,'" Gardiner said. "And it's just one of many places in Daytona that will really surprise meeting planners."

Palm Beach County

Despite the "Palm Beach" in Palm Beach County, the area is surprisingly affordable for planners. And, with 16,000 guest rooms and 1 million square feet of meeting space — not to mention seaside resorts and amenities — it's perfectly-positioned to attract meetings.

In West Palm Beach, the county's urban core, you'll find the 350,000-square-foot Palm Beach County Convention Center and nearby City Place, a mixed-use downtown development of shops, restaurants, and residential units. Hilton is planning a 400-room convention hotel projected for 2014.

The legendary Breakers in Palm Beach has 540 newly renovated guest rooms, 65,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, and dining options ranging from haute cuisine to beachfront bites. The Boca Raton Resort boasts 1,043 guest rooms, nearly 146,000 square feet of total indoor/outdoor function space and a dozen dining options. And the oceanfront Jupiter Beach Resort has 159 rooms, 12,000 square feet of meeting space, a full-service spa, and great seafood at Sinclair's Ocean Grill.

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Cabaret is alive and well on the island of Palm Beach at The Royal Room Supper Club at The Colony around the corner from Worth Avenue and the beautiful beach.

Photo courtesy of Palm Beach County CVB

The stunning skyline over Biscayne Bay signifies that Miami has arrived as an international capital. As a meetings/events destination, however, it arrived a long time ago. Host of 10 Super Bowls (more than any other city), international corporate and association meetings and political conventions, Miami's meetings infrastructure is second to none.

In all, there are 47,000 hotel rooms and 349 hotels/resorts citywide. Across the causeway in the heart of fabled South Beach is The Miami Beach Convention Center with 500,000 square feet of exhibit space and 70 adaptable rooms for breakouts.

In October, the new JW Marriott Marquis debuts with 313 rooms and 80,000 square feet of meeting space including the 20,000-square-foot Grand Ballroom, which will accommodate up to 1,800 attendees. Other property hallmarks include the DB Bistro Moderne by James Beard Award-winning chef Daniel Boulud, and a two-floor, 50,000-square-foot indoor lifestyle and entertainment complex with an NBA-approved basketball arena, full-size tennis court, world-renowned Jim McLean Golf School, Rik Rak Spa & Salon, virtual bowling alley, Met 2 Fitness and more. The Marriott also will offer GoThere Virtual Meetings, powered by Cisco's TelePresence virtual meetings technology. Also downtown is the Epic Hotel, opened in 2008, a luxury property with 411 rooms and 25,000 square feet of space.

Miami Beach's legendary oceanfront Fontainebleau Miami offers 1,500 guest rooms, 107,000 square feet of space for meetings and 11 restaurants. The nearby Eden Roc now has 631 rooms, and 71,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space.

Unique venues in Miami Beach include The Villa by Barton G., housed in former residence of late fashion designer Gianni Versace. The 19,000-square-foot historic mansion, which underwent a \$1 million renovation last spring, is a boutique luxury hotel, restaurant and event space available for corporate functions. In downtown Miami is the Adrienne Arsht Center, a performing-arts showpiece that's widely used for meetings.

Zuma is a superb Japanese restaurant located in the Epic Hotel — the first U.S. location for this London-based restaurant group. And STK steak house, in South Beach's Gansevoort hotel, bills itself as "Not Your Daddy's Steakhouse."

West of the city, the Doral Golf Resort & Spa, a Marriott Resort, has been hosting successful corporate and incentive functions for nearly 50 years. "We're one of the few resorts in America with five championship golf courses — and one of them is the world-famous Blue Monster," said Chris Bielski, director of sales and marketing. The Doral encompasses 650 tropical acres, and has 693 guest rooms and 110,000 square feet for meetings, which includes the 24,000-square-foot Legends Ballroom. Its newly opened Mesazul restaurant, a Latin-American steak house, overlooks the Blue Monster golf course. There's also a new Latin-inspired tapas lounge for casual dining called Bossa Nova. Other amenities include the 52,000-square-foot Spa at Doral and Pritikin Longevity Center, the Spa Pritikin Restaurant, and indoor and outdoor pools.

Tim Craig is corporate account manager at the Morley Companies Inc., a Michigan-based meetings management and production firm that also provides corporate training programs. The company runs two or three meetings a year at Doral. And they've got another one with 450 attendees scheduled for this October. "Our attendees always ask when we're going back to Doral," Craig said. "They love the restaurants. They love the grounds. And they love the meeting spaces."

Key Largo

Where mainland Florida stops, the Conch Republic begins with the 120-mile long Florida Keys island chain. The first stop is Key Largo, an hour from Miami.

Key Largo is home to America's first undersea park, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, where attendees can see abundant tropical marine life in crystal clear water a number of ways — on snorkeling, scuba diving and glass-bottom boat trips.

With 30,000 feet of meeting space, including a dedicated 7,500-square-foot ballroom, outdoor settings, golf, water sports and more, Ocean Reef Club on Florida's Key Largo is an ideal environment for private group events.

Photo courtesy of Ocean Reef Club

Planners looking for a tropical getaway in a very private setting can set their sights on The Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo. Ocean Reef enjoys a six-decade history as a corporate retreat for captains of industry, even earning praise from the U.S. Secret Service as one of the most secure communities in the country. The 2,000-acre property includes its own private airport and personal attention from conference and concierge services. Meeting facilities total 30,000 square feet and include two ballrooms and 15 breakout rooms. There are a great variety of teambuilding activities to choose from, including the cardboard boat regatta, beach olympics hermit crab races, survivor challenge and more. There are 300 accommodations, three championship golf courses, a private beach with saltwater lagoon, two infinity pools, marinas, shops in the fishing village and the Salon & Spa.

From the northwestern Panhandle to Key West — the southernmost city in the U.S. — the Sunshine State offers unlimited variety and choices for meetings, with two important factors in common: unmatched value and universal appeal. Enough to weather whatever storm — or Gulf oil spill — befalls them and come out sunny side up. **C&IT**