



Orlando No.1 for Meetings

Orlando Continues to Raise the Bar Every Year

For the fourth year out of the last five, in 2016 Orlando ranked No. 1 once again on Cvent's most recent list of the top meeting destinations in the U.S.

"Orlando continues to raise the bar every year," proclaims George Aguel, president and CEO of Visit Orlando.

Home to the country's second-largest convention center and the second-largest concentration of hotel rooms in

By David Swanson

Orlando continues to grow, with even more new options each year," says Aguel. "Unique venues such as I-Drive 360, Pointe Orlando and Mango's Tropical Café combine engaging environments, onsite entertainment and flexible event spaces. And new venues like the Main Event entertainment complex at Pointe Orlando and the coming-soon Topgolf Orlando location provide fresh experiences for attendees such as virtual, interactive and immersive sporting environments.

"Planners want to bring their events to the next level with novel experiences, and venues such as these — and of course our world-renowned theme parks — deliver the variety and creativity to do just that." It's these ingredients, Aguel suggests, that make the destination more desirable to corporate groups. This year, Orlando looks forward to welcoming several new corporations hosting conferences this year, including Microsoft, Walmart, Grainger and Ellucian.

"We continue to see a rise in the combination of business and leisure travel," says Aguel, a combo he refers to as "bleisure" travel. "Our destination offers creative opportunities for attendees to spend time together and network, but with an added entertainment component that really

"Planners may not be aware of how much Orlando continues to grow, with even more new options each year."



*George Aguel, President and CEO
Visit Orlando*

the U.S., Orlando can hardly be said to rest on its laurels. The Central Florida destination continues to seek new ways to stimulate its convention industry, a crucial component of the city's economy. At the Orange County Convention Center, total attendance in 2016 was 1,456,816, an increase of 6.5 percent over the previous year. The number of individual events was up 17.7 percent. The region's hotel inventory has grown 37 percent over the last two decades, with 119,000 rooms today at a variety of price points, from budget to luxury.

And the growth shows no sign of abating. No sooner did Universal Orlando Resort debut its fifth standalone hotel, Sapphire Falls Resort in 2016, than the company announced a sixth — the Aventura Hotel — to open summer 2018. Disney's Coronado Springs Resort — the largest of six convention hotels at the Mouse House — is expanding, with a 15-story tower planned to add 500 rooms to the hotel.

"Planners may not be aware of how much



The Pointe Orlando dining and entertainment district.



The Coca-Cola Orlando Eye.

enhances the overall experience. For instance, instead of hosting a traditional banquet in a hotel ballroom, planners can take their group into a theme park one evening,

virtually taking over an entire attraction, for a truly unforgettable memory.”

Bleisure Business Stepping Up

Vince LaRuffa, senior vice president of resort sales and marketing at Universal Orlando Resort concurs with Aguel.

“Business and leisure can be combined,” suggests LaRuffa. “We’re definitely seeing a boost, and at Universal Orlando we’re really able to allow groups to take advantage. If an attendee wants to bring their family, they can bring them along to enjoy dining and attractions. And this means the planner doesn’t have to plan every minute of an attendee’s day—they have access to water-taxi service and CityWalk, and dining at other hotels, regardless of what hotel they stay at.”

One could argue that today’s Universal Orlando is the house that Harry Potter built. In June 2010, at Universal’s

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Credit: © Universal Orlando Resort

second theme park “gate” Islands of Adventure, the company opened the WIZARDING WORLD OF HARRY POTTER. Attendance at the park surged — from an estimated 5.9 million in 2009 to 7.7 million in 2010 (and the Potter attraction was only open the latter half of that year). In July 2014, a Diagon Alley expansion of WIZARDING WORLD debuted at the adjacent Universal Studios Florida, and attendance at that theme park spiked again, from an estimated 7.1 million in 2013 to 8.3 million the following year. The cash infusion has no doubt prompted parent company NBCUniversal to reinvest in its busy Orlando operation.

“Potter inspired us to improve what was already a pretty incredible destination,” says LaRuffa. “Since 2010 we’ve introduced 25 new guest experiences, and grown more than any other destination that I can think of. There’s been an expansion of CityWalk, with 10 new dining concepts there in 2015-16 alone. We’re opening Race Through New York Starring Jimmy Fallon at Universal Studios Florida in April, and Universal’s Volcano Bay will have a grand opening on May 25.”

While the initial two Universal Studios Florida hotels, Loews Portofino Bay Hotel and Hard Rock Hotel, offered only limited meeting facilities, the company has invested heavily in the meetings sector in recent years.

“We were limited in terms of size of meeting we could accommodate,” says LaRuffa. “But we’ve expanded pretty dramatically.” Universal grew the meeting space at Loews Royal Pacific Resort, opened the adjacent Loews Sapphire Falls Resort, and named the shared convention center between them the Loews Meeting Complex at Universal



Credit: © Universal Orlando Resort

Group events at Universal Studios Florida (l) and The Wizarding World of Harry Potter.

Orlando. The combined complex offers 2,000 rooms and 247,000 sf of meeting space, including a 41,000-sf ballroom. In total, the five hotels at Universal Orlando today contain 5,200 rooms overall and 295,000 sf of meeting space — and more is under construction.

“We had several corporate and association meeting planners that had a complete array of meetings but, certain meetings, they couldn’t bring here. We now have the capability to accommodate meetings of all sizes, and to deliver to a broader variety of needs.”

And, of course, Universal Orlando Resort is not your typical hotel and meeting complex, providing the equip-



“We have an incredible team of creative experts that can offer everything from intimate, memorable moments to volunteer experiences.”

*Vince LaRuffa, Senior Vice President of Resort Sales and Marketing
Universal Orlando Resort, Orlando, FL*

ment and professionals to take a program beyond its traditional banquet dinner.

“We’re all about immersion,” adds LaRuffa. “We have an incredible team of creative experts that can offer everything from intimate, memorable moments to volunteer experiences. We’re a powerful combo of Loews hotels, which has a great tradition of hospitality, combined with Universal, an entertainment company. Put that together, and we’re committed to exceeding expectations and providing unforgettable experiences. We really believe that Universal Orlando Resort is unmatched in its ability to provide engaging, inspiring and entertaining experiences.” **ORLANDO**



The outdoor demo for Bombardier Recreational Products.

Flexibility Is the Name of the Game

When you do your site inspection of meeting hotels in Orlando, one word crops up repeatedly: flexibility. Finding a venue that can be easily molded into a facility that covers all your needs, but some places deliver it better than others.

For its annual Club BRP event last August, Quebec-based recreational vehicle manufacturer Bombardier Recreational Products (BRP) needed a unique host hotel and meeting space to showcase its 2017 lineup of Sea-Doo watercraft, Can-Am Spyder three-wheel vehicles, and Can-Am ATV and side-by-side vehicles.

"We have very specific site requirements," explains Maryse Messier, BRP's manager, event marketing. The annual event is large enough to involve 27 trucks for hauling gear and equipment, and complex enough that site

"It's tough to find demo sites that are located next to nice, big hotels.

Fortunately, the Hyatt Regency Orlando provided that."



*Maryse Messier, Manager, Event Marketing
Bombardier Recreational Products, Valcourt, Québec, Canada*

visits begin almost two years ahead. "Our dates are very specific as well, all related to production and availability of prototypes. To launch our new product lines, we need 70,000 sf for our showroom alone, plus another 40,000 sf for the global show and another space for meals. Then, we need an outdoor demo site."

Messier says the demo site is a particular challenge. "It's tough to find demo sites that are located next to nice, big hotels. Fortunately, the Hyatt Regency Orlando provided that." The hotel, formerly The Peabody Orlando, also ranks higher than any other in Orlando on Cvent's 2016 list of the top meeting hotels in the U.S.

"In selecting our location the big trigger for us with the Hyatt Regency Orlando was that the demo site, a privately

owned parking lot, was right next to the hotel — it was perfect for us. The attendees could walk out of the showroom in the hotel right to the space where we showed off our new products."

There also was a Global Product Reveal Show, during which the new lineup is showcased. "We thought of doing it in the demo area, but after further consideration we became concerned about rain in August. So, we looked for a space in the Orange County Convention Center, and, all I can say is, they were a lifesaver. They had space available in the exhibit hall at the South Concourse. It was amazing."

With almost 2,400 attendees, Club BRP used virtually all of the inventory at the 1,641-room Hyatt Regency Orlando (a smaller block of guests was parked at the Rosen Centre Hotel across the street). The Hyatt Regency offers 315,000 sf of meeting space, including 105 breakout rooms, and five pillar-free ballrooms, with the largest being the 55,000-sf Regency Ballroom.

"The Hyatt Regency convention center is very modern and efficient and well thought out, the flow was good. The hotel also helped a lot when we did our product reveal in the convention center by guiding our attendees over. The only drawback was that the distance from guest rooms in the first tower over to the convention center was a little farther than some would have liked. But once they arrived there, it all came together." Messier pointed to the Hyatt Regency's event planning manager Marjorie Trott as being a particular asset to the hotel. "If event planners deal with Marjorie, they're going to have great service."

One disappointment to the BRP team was that the Hyatt Regency's lagoon-like pool area was not available for a closing night-party. "There was an early curfew for the pool, and they wouldn't extend it, even though we occupied 90 percent of the guest rooms. So we ended up doing the party inside. Guests wound up in the pool anyway, though without the music."

BRP also scheduled a "free night," with prepaid debit cards provided to attendees to use anywhere. "Our DMC Hello Florida helped us with coordination of shuttles to



The Bombardier Recreational Products Global Product Reveal Show.



The Rosen Centre Hotel.

three destinations: Disney Springs, Universal CityWalk and Pointe Orlando. This was a way for our guests to experience the area and discover the city. Everybody was very happy with how it turned out for that night."

What advice does Messier have for meeting planners considering Orlando? "Depending on the complexity of your plans, if there might be a need, hire a DMC. We got away from DMCs for a while, but now we're starting using them again. When it's a good DMC, you can leave your special needs to them, and they will take care of it from beginning to end. Hello Florida was very professional, and they helped so much to take the pressure off."

In planning a meeting for the plant and technology managers at chemicals manufacturer Arkema, Matrix Meeting Solutions' Jeff Garnes reached out to Florida-based Creative Imagineering for his closing-night event. Garnes,

president of the Valparaiso, Indiana-based Matrix Meeting Solutions, says he had terrific results using Creative Imagineering's custom software for a game show.

"Creative Imagineering has custom software and game scoring hardware, and for our meeting we designed the final onsite dinner to take place in the (Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek) plenary session room," saving big bucks on audio-visual, Garnes adds. "They brought in a retired broadcaster/comedian as a game show host and created a custom 'Family Feud' competition. It not only heightened engagement between our participants but created a truly memorable peak to the meeting — they were cheering and howling with delight."

Garnes also recommends tapping into the creative team



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Orlando Meeting Hotels

behind the scenes at Universal Studios. “They’re experts at delivering that unexpected ‘wow’ factor. We’ve worked with them both at their onsite venues and also to bring their concepts to remote events.”

For his 80-person Arkema meeting last October, Garnes used the Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek, a 400-room property located on a unique lakeside setting minutes from Walt Disney World Resort. The Wyndham has more than 32,000 sf of flexible meeting and function space, including the Ponce de Leon Ballroom, which can be divided into seven sections. The resort, which opened in 2011, is one of the few properties both managed and owned by Wyndham; a Wyndham-managed time-share is adjacent — guests of both properties can use the facilities (pools, restaurants and bars) of the other.

Garnes says he was tipped off about the Wyndham by a prior client.

“The group had a very successful meeting earlier in the year and couldn’t say enough about the Wyndham’s high level of service. We gave them a close look and found fresh air in both their sales approach and their focus on delivering high-quality conference service support. We worked with them to obtain a very attractive conference rate. Perhaps one of Orlando’s best attributes for conference participants is the opportunity to share the experience and bring family along, and Wyndham offered pre/post meeting options that gave our participants quality family time to enjoy the many attractions.” (One attribute not common among meeting hotels: 84 family rooms with separate bunk bedrooms for kids.)

While Garnes notes that superior function space isn’t a



Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek.

unique requirement, the arrangements he negotiated with the Wyndham provided the opportunity to deliver an outstanding experience for his client. “The ballroom space we contracted was not only contiguous for meetings, meals and breakouts — enabling our group much greater efficiency with participant movement during intervals between



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Jeff Garnes, President
Matrix Meeting Solutions, Valparaiso, IN

events — it allowed us to design the plenary session room more creatively, delivering both aesthetic appeal and even saving on audio-visual equipment costs.

Garnes says the Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek has “more than its fair share” of talented, outstanding meeting pros. “Sales Manager Stan Kaczorowski set the stage, letting us know that — even with a group as small as ours — he was prepared to showcase and deliver a fresh take on how they create and build on the typically over-used word, ‘relationship.’ And Miguelina ‘Miggy’ Urena, the director of catering and conference services, took the ball from Stan and personally oversaw delivery of all aspects of our program. Somehow she seemed to break the laws of physics and be ahead of us before we knew we needed her.

“So often you find a great initial impression diminishes between contract and meeting execution, but with these folks, we found our experience was only amplified,” Garnes adds. **ORLANDO**



The Arkema meeting, held in October at the Wyndham Grand Orlando Resort Bonnet Creek.