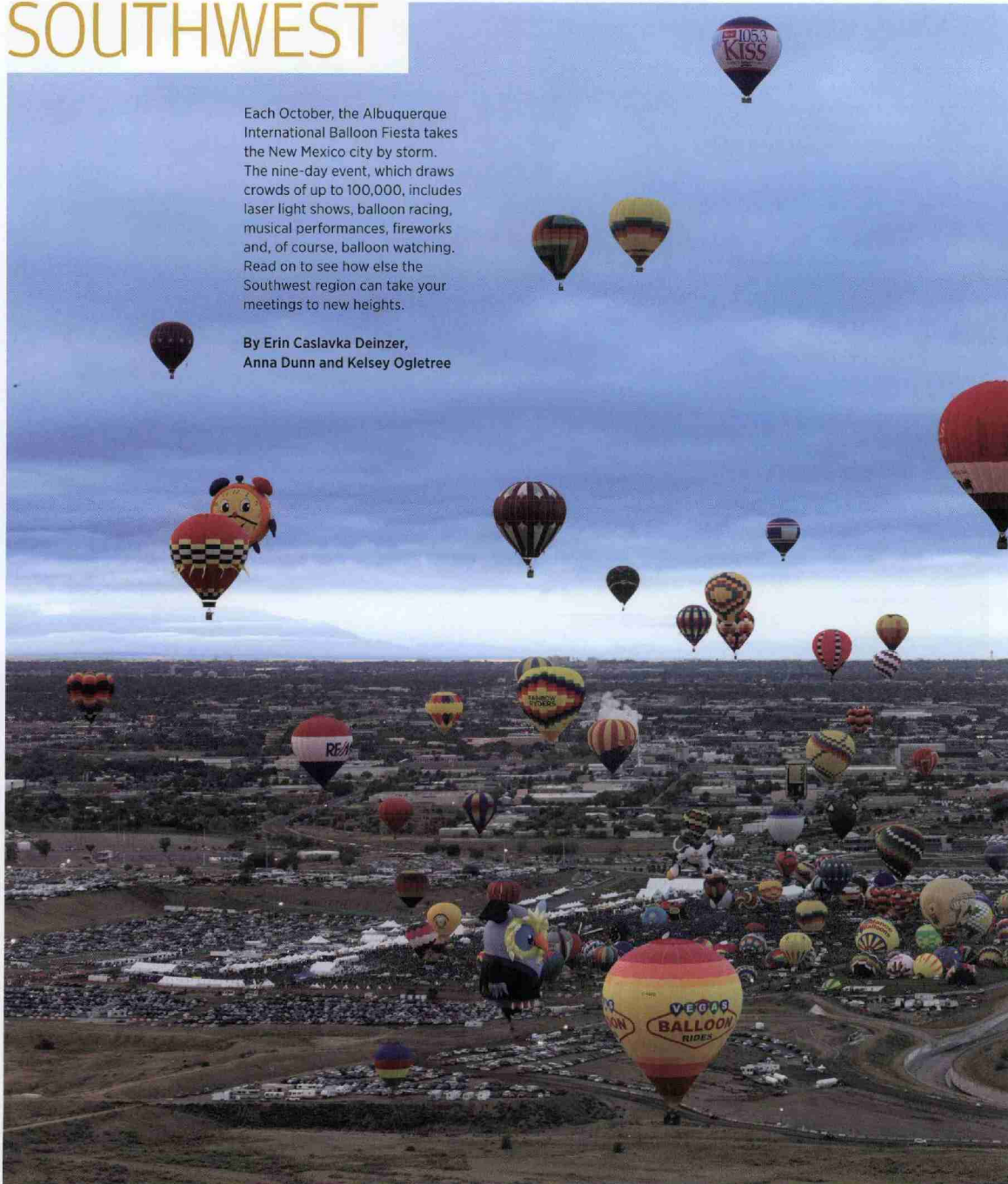


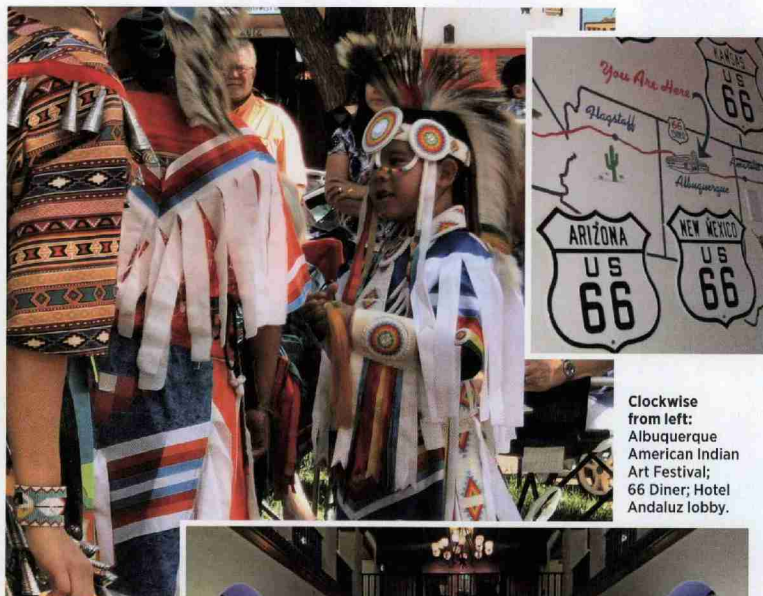
SOUTHWEST

Each October, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta takes the New Mexico city by storm. The nine-day event, which draws crowds of up to 100,000, includes laser light shows, balloon racing, musical performances, fireworks and, of course, balloon watching. Read on to see how else the Southwest region can take your meetings to new heights.

By Erin Caslavka Deinzer,
Anna Dunn and Kelsey Ogletree



DUNCAN DAWLINSON



Clockwise from left: Albuquerque American Indian Art Festival; 66 Diner; Hotel Andaluz lobby.



Walk This Way

An easily navigable downtown and a historic-turned-trendy hotel attract groups to New Mexico's largest city.

With an average of 310 days of sunshine a year, walking is the preferred method of transportation for many visitors in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The city is divided into 11 distinct neighborhoods, including downtown, which is home to the 270,000-sq.-ft. Albuquerque Convention Center.

"Downtown is really set up in a way that lends itself to getting around on foot," says Brenna Moore, communications specialist at Albuquerque CVB. "The convention center is close to at least 30 restaurants as well as major hotels and art galleries." It's also a few blocks from Central Avenue, part of the famed Route 66 and lined with restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques.

A five-minute walk from the convention center is the AAA Four Diamond, 107-room Hotel Andaluz. Originally opened in 1939 as the fourth Hilton Hotel ever built, the luxurious boutique property in downtown underwent a \$30 million renovation and rebranding in 2009, earning LEED Gold certification for its sustainability efforts. With nearly 7,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space, it can comfortably host meetings for up to 300 people. —ECD

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 17,000

Nearest airport: Albuquerque International Sunport

Convention center: Albuquerque Convention Center

Meeting space: 167,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 27

COMING SOON

- Boese Brothers Brewery, downtown Albuquerque's first full brewery operation, opened in August.
- Phase one of the city's 50-Mile Activity Loop, a multiuse trail and bikeway facility, was completed this fall.

[CASE STUDY]

All the Pretty Horses. 3:10 to Yuma. Cowboys & Aliens. Lonesome Dove. If this list includes some of your favorite Westerns, you've undoubtedly seen Bonanza Creek Ranch on the big screen. Located in the foothills of northern New Mexico, Bonanza Creek has been the site of more than 130 movies in its 60-year history. Encompassing several thousand acres that include five ponds, two homesteads and one Western "town," the ranch can be rented out for private events in the high desert country of New Mexico.

An insurance company recently contracted Lydia Griego-Hansen, co-owner of Albuquerque-based Destination Southwest, to coordinate a dinner for 400 employees and guests as part of an incentive trip. The company wanted an experience that could only be found in New Mexico, so Griego-Hansen suggested a barbecue dinner at Bonanza Creek.

"We used the Western town set and brought in stagecoaches, gaming tables, saloon girls, cattle drivers, an old-time photographer and a sheriff to run the jail," she says. "To get everyone really involved, we asked them to come in Western attire, but we also handed out bandanas and cowboy hats as they walked in. Everyone really got into character."

JOHN SHIM; GRANGER MEADOR; PATRICIA HENSCHEN



Clockwise from left: Las Cruces farmers market; shrimp lettuce cups at Savoy de Mesilla; pool at Hotel Encanto de Las Cruces.

[CASE STUDY]

In August, the Bi-District Conference of the Las Cruces Rotary hosted 100 attendees at Hotel Encanto de Las Cruces for a two-day event, bringing together business owners and managers from New Mexico, West Texas and Mexico. Victor Villalobos, conference organizer, says about 75 percent of attendees stayed at Hotel Encanto, with many also choosing to add on a day before or after the conference for sightseeing in nearby Mesilla, White Sands National Monument, Spaceport America or International Space Hall of Fame.

This marked the third year the group has held its annual conference at Hotel Encanto. Villalobos says it's well-suited for his event based on its size, layout and accommodations. He also names the on-site dining (Garduno's Restaurant & Cantina and Azul Ultra Lounge) and overall ambience of the resort as contributing to attendee satisfaction.

But perhaps the main reason the resort remains the home of the conference is its willingness to roll with the punches, notes Villalobos. "Only about half of those who show up have preregistered," he says. "The hotel staff has been really accommodating in adding last-minute food service as well as making rooms available at the conference rate. They've gone out of their way to take care of us."

The Whole Enchilada

Las Cruces heats things up with food festivals celebrating its local spice.

Ask anyone who's familiar with Tex-Mex cuisine, and they'll tell you about New Mexico's famous chile peppers. Located about 50 miles northwest of El Paso, Texas, along the banks of the Rio Grande, the city of Las Cruces, New Mexico, has fully embraced its connections to the local foodie scene. Plan a conference to coincide with The Whole Enchilada Fiesta, a three-day festival in late September that draws thousands to the city each year and includes an enchilada-eating contest. In nearby Mesilla, planners can host an off-site event at La Posta de Mesilla restaurant. Located inside a historic adobe, it's been rated among the top 10 greatest Mexican restaurants by USA Today and has private dining rooms and outdoor courtyards.

In addition to its LEED Gold-certified convention center, Las Cruces is home to the Mesquite Historic District. Twenty-two blocks of the original town have been restored to their mid-1800s glory. Planners can coordinate tours of the district or take advantage of event space at Rio Grande Theatre, a Spanish Baroque facility with theater seating for 422.

For an outdoor affair (Las Cruces averages 350 sunny days per year), New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum gives attendees a true sense of place. The 47-acre site includes a cattle ranch, a greenhouse, gardens, an on-site theater and a colonial home with demonstrations and exhibitions. —ECD

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 3,000

Nearest airport:
El Paso International

Convention center:
Las Cruces Convention Center

Meeting space:
30,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 6

NEW IN 2015

➤ An expansion to Spaceport America (in nearby city Truth or Consequences, New Mexico) was unveiled in June.

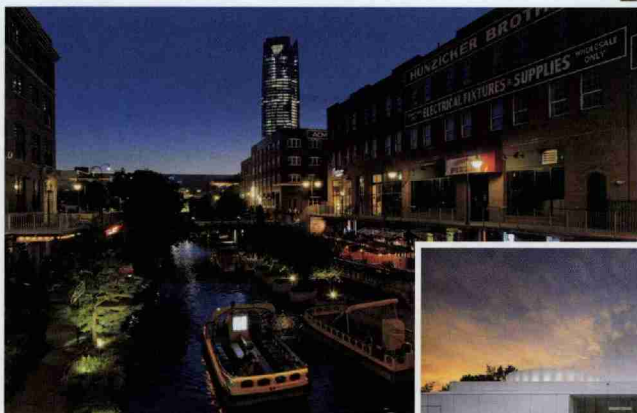
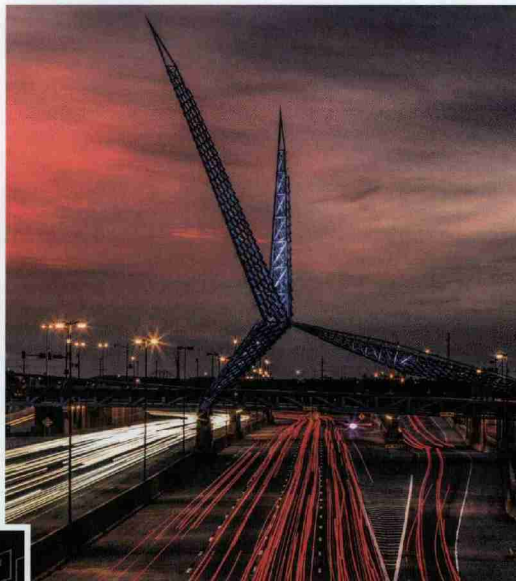
SANDY DE MESILLA; JEFF CAVEN

On the Horizon

Oklahoma City is mapping out its future with its third Metropolitan Area Project.

The decade ahead looks promising for Oklahoma City, a destination with 300 days of sunshine per year (surprise!) and tons of authentic Western history. It's also a centrally located metropolis for corporate groups, including Genuine Parts Company and Hart Energy, which have both met in the city recently.

Thanks to the third phase of its \$777 million Metropolitan Area Project, known as MAPS 3, the city is on its way to completing eight significant projects by the end of 2019. The projects are being funded by a 1 cent sales tax initiative that began in April 2010 and will add to the city's renaissance. For starters, a new \$252 million convention center is currently in the concept stage, with a three-year construction period expected to begin in 2016. The center will include an elevated ballroom with city and park views, meeting space, entrances on all sides of the building and belowground exhibit halls and loading docks, with footbridges to Myriad Botanical Gardens and the future 70-acre Downtown Public Park, another MAPS 3 project. Also in the works is a modern streetcar system, improvements along the Oklahoma River and on the grounds of the Oklahoma State Fair, and new trails and sidewalks to make the city more walkable. —AD



Clockwise from top: SkyDance Bridge; Park House restaurant; Bricktown.



QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 16,000

Nearest airport: Will Rogers World

Convention center: Cox Convention Center

Meeting space: 152,500 square feet

Meeting rooms: 21

[CASE STUDY]

Pharmacy software provider Computer-Rx brought more than 600 independent pharmacy owners and technicians, pharmacists and their families to Oklahoma City in April for the company's fourth annual Idea Exchange, which is contracted to return to the city through 2018. Attendees met at Cox Convention Center and had room blocks at nearby Renaissance Oklahoma City Convention Center Hotel and The Skirvin Hilton Oklahoma City.

While its main focus is education, the conference also emphasizes entertainment. Its opening reception at the new Park House restaurant was a particularly memorable event for Lauren Warkentine, Computer-Rx's director of operations. "Attendees

enjoyed the atmosphere and networking at Park House, a gorgeous venue overlooking Myriad Botanical Gardens and Devon Tower," she says. She also scored 200 tickets for an Oklahoma City Thunder game for attendees and, on the last night, held a casino-themed customer appreciation event to give guests "a chance to relax and have fun after a long weekend jam-packed with learning," Warkentine shares.

As Computer-Rx is based in Oklahoma City, Warkentine says, "It is so rewarding to hear people rave about how much they love it when they come." She touts the city's safety, cleanliness and friendly residents as benefits to meeting there.

NEW AND COMING SOON

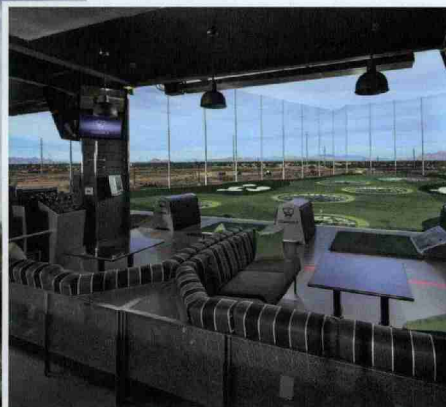
➤ Construction continues on the \$132 million Downtown Public Park, which will have gardens, fountains, a great lawn, a promenade and a lake once completed in 2021.

➤ Topgolf opened in June; Brickopolis, an entertainment center and restaurant in Bricktown, opened in August; an 82,000-sq.-ft. Cabela's opened in September; and Riversport Rapids, a whitewater rafting facility, will open in May 2016.

OKC CITY: MIKE SPIVEY



Clockwise from left: Saguaro Course at We-Ko-Pa Golf Club; Topgolf in nearby Gilbert; Boulders Club at Boulders Resort & Spa.



Take a Swing

A paradise for golfers of all levels awaits in the Arizona desert.

There's a certain breed of golfer that flocks to Phoenix each winter, predictable as the nonobservance of daylight saving time, to play every course in the area: golf warriors, as the locals call them. But your company execs need not be scratch players to enjoy the pristine golf courses in the greater Phoenix area, whether you're arranging a tournament as part of a conference or allotting free time for them to hit the links on their own.

The 36-hole We-Ko-Pa Golf Club, a 40-minute drive from downtown Phoenix, is a true desert golf experience. Both the Saguaro and Cholla courses are target-style, so for average- to beginner-level players, a few extra sleeves of balls are recommended (perfect sponsorship opportunity!). Though the desert terrain can be rather unforgiving, the spectacular views are worth it. We-Ko-Pa Resort & Conference Center, which relaunched in fall 2014 (formerly Radisson Fort McDowell Resort), has 246 guest rooms and 25,000 square feet of meeting space, so groups can stay and play in one place.

Another notable course is nearby TPC Scottsdale, where the PGA Waste Management Phoenix Open is held every year. It underwent an extensive renovation of its Stadium Course and clubhouse in 2014. And the game gets high-tech at The Boulders, a Waldorf Astoria Resort, which added digital caddies offering tablet-based assistance to players in all carts.

Golfers of all skill levels (and even those who've never picked up a club) can play together at Topgolf, with two recently opened locations near Phoenix in Gilbert and Scottsdale. With more than 100 hitting bays across multiple levels, 250 high-definition TVs, a full-service bar and catering services, either location can be booked for events. Players can have a friendly competition hitting microchipped balls from offset clubs (read: easy to hit) at dartboardlike targets. It's even more fun after dark, when targets light up and the music gets cranked. —KO

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 62,000

Nearest airport: Phoenix Sky Harbor International

Convention center: Phoenix Convention Center

Meeting space: 900,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 99

NEW IN 2015

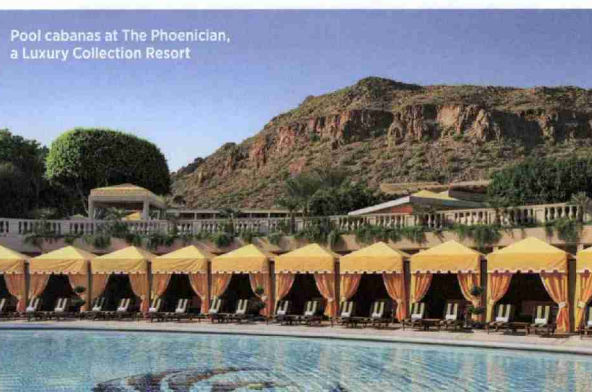
- The former Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center reopened as The Scottsdale Resort at McCormick Ranch, a Destination Hotel in September following a \$10 million renovation.
- Hi Fi Kitchen & Cocktails added a new audiovisual system to its indoor/outdoor space, including an upgraded 45-ft. digital graffiti wall. The entire space can be rented for private events.
- Musical Instrument Museum will host the two-day, second annual MIMFest outdoor music festival Nov. 7-8.

LONNA TUCKER

Small City, Big Meetings

When much of the country is blanketed with snow and cold temperatures, not many destinations are more appealing than Scottsdale, Arizona. With average highs in the 60s throughout the winter, it's no wonder companies flock to Phoenix's hip little sister for meetings. Medical conferences are particularly common here—for example, Mayo Clinic's 26th Annual Family Medicine and Internal Medicine Update, World Aquatic Health Conference, and Pharmacy Benefit Oversight and Compliance Congress each met in Scottsdale in 2015.

Perhaps it's the abundance of extra-large meeting facilities (and outdoor activities) that draws space-intensive events like medical meetings. Take The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa, which has 732 rooms, more than 200,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space and 41 meeting rooms, as well as several beautiful patio spaces including a fire pit area that begs for a sunset reception overlooking the neighboring Kierland Golf Club. Other large properties nearby include the 643-room The Phoenician, a Luxury Collection Resort, with 160,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting space, an on-site cactus garden and golf; the 649-room Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, with more than 150,000 square feet of meeting space, a 44,000-sq.-ft. spa, tennis facilities and golf; and the 497-room Talking Stick Resort, with 100,000 square feet of meeting space, golf and a casino. —KO



Pool cabanas at The Phoenician, a Luxury Collection Resort

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 14,700

Nearest airport: Phoenix Sky Harbor International

Largest convention hotel: The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa

Meeting space: 200,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 41