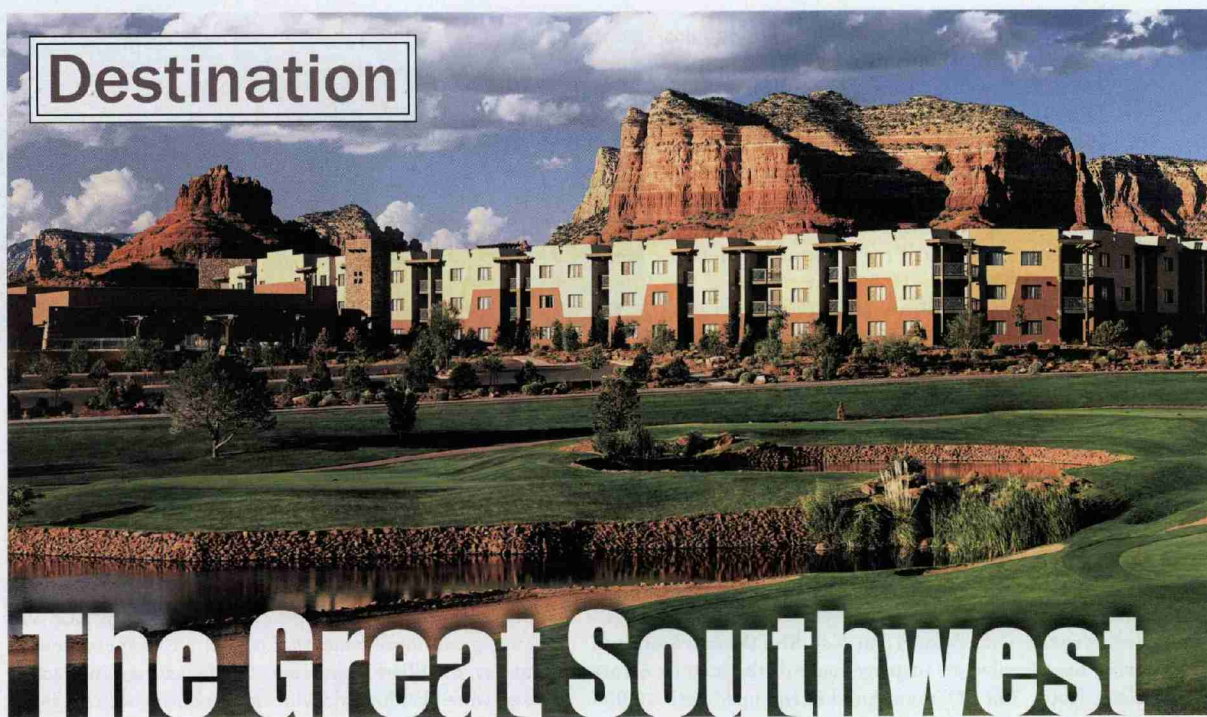


Destination



The Great Southwest

Featuring Some of the Country's Most Inspirational Settings for Business

By Christine Loomis

The Southwestern United States may seem far from the nation's traditional centers of corporate enterprise, but business thrives here. The area is at the center of business for many organizations, including highly respected Fortune 500 and 100 companies — some founded and built here. Not surprising, executives and planners from corporations across the country choose the Southwest for meetings.

Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City's Fortune 500 companies are major players in the gas and oil industry, making it the go-to destination for meetings related to that field.

"The State of Oklahoma has deep roots in and is a very active hub for the oil and gas industry," says Barry Haest, vice president of events at Houston-based Hart Energy. "Oklahoma City is home to such leading oil and gas companies as Devon, Chesapeake, Continental Resources and American Energy Partners, to name a few. Upon researching and speaking with our clients, an overwhelming majority recommended we host an oil and gas conference in Oklahoma City."

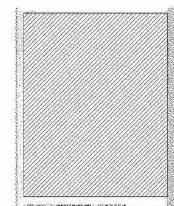
Hart's DUG Midcontinent Conference and Exhibition drew more than 1,800 attendees in March. It was based

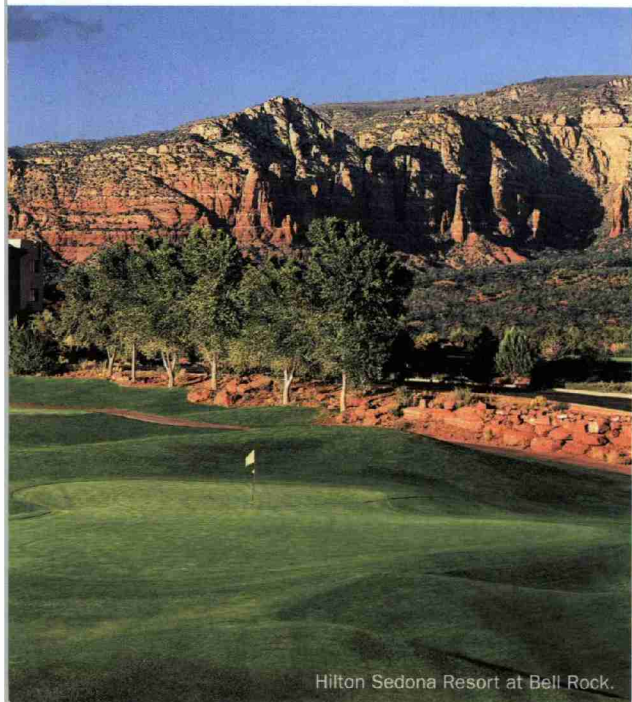
at the Cox Convention Center, with room blocks at the Renaissance Oklahoma City Convention Center Hotel and the Skirvin Hilton Hotel.

"We chose the Renaissance as our headquarters hotel because of its close proximity to the Cox Convention Center and convenient skybridge," Haest says. "We also selected the Skirvin Hilton Hotel because of its historic significance and close walking distance to the convention center. This hotel first opened in 1911 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The staffs at both hotels were very professional and accommodating for us and our conference attendees."

Haest says the downtown and Bricktown areas were a draw as well. "A tremendous amount of investment has been made into the downtown and Bricktown areas. We knew our attendees, exhibitors and sponsors would take advantage of and enjoy the excellent local restaurants and bars."

One favorite was Mickey Mantle's Steakhouse, which the group used for its speaker dinner. "It was a big hit with the 25-plus oil and gas executives we had invited to speak at our conference," Haest says. "Named after Oklahoma's baseball legend, this upscale and contemporary restaurant was able to easily accommodate our party. The food and service were out-





Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock.

Credit: Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock

standing, and many of our speakers and guests commented on the unique artwork displayed throughout the restaurant, which depicted Mr. Mantle's extraordinary career with the New York Yankees.

"The majority of our other attendees took advantage of the unique restaurants and other nightlife activities in the city's historic Bricktown area. And some of our exhibitors and sponsors hosted private dinners and receptions for clients and other VIPs in Bricktown."

The majority of the conference took place at the convention center, including most meals. "We utilized the entire Cox Convention Center for our conference. Breakfast, lunch and catered networking breaks were hosted in the convention center. And logistically speaking," Haest adds, "the highlight was hosting an 800-person plated lunch on the floor of the exhibit hall."

One challenge at the convention center related to rigging, which Haest says is an important factor for this group. "There are no rigging points in the convention center and the venue is built above the parking garage, so weight limitations were a challenge. These limitations did affect some of our exhibitors who like to bring in and display large industrial equipment in their booths."

On the plus side, transportation was a breeze. "The transportation was easy in Oklahoma City," Haest says. "There were plenty of flights in and out of the Will Rogers Airport. And as Oklahoma City is located in the center of the state, it was easy for our road-warrior clients who like to drive from Dallas, Houston, Denver and other cities in Oklahoma."

Meeting in Oklahoma City proved to be very successful for

this group. "Attendance for the conference," Haest notes, "was at an all-time high."

Arizona

Sedona

Sedona offers a very different vibe, one based on its natural beauty and reputation as a place of healing and positive energy. It's not surprising that meetings focused on well-being are drawn to this northern Arizona town of just 10,000 residents.

"We used to come to Sedona often with our different class offerings," says Colleen Russell, meeting planner with the International Alliance of Healthcare Educators in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. "That slowed and this is our first time back in four or five years. Our staff and attendees really enjoy the red rocks and the general spiritual atmosphere."

The alliance, which includes several institutes, brought 70 attendees to Sedona in January for one of its education conferences. The Hilton Sedona Resort at Bell Rock served as host hotel.

"Since we plan approximately 400 meetings per year, we try to keep them as similar as possible," Russell says. "We always try to find a hotel within 20 miles of the airport and within walking distance of area restaurants and shopping. We prefer that parking be complimentary to our attendees. A big influence for us is the cost of meeting-room rental, food and beverage and the cost of sleeping rooms."

Because the meetings consist almost exclusively of classes, there are not many group components. "When we hold meetings, our attendees are all on their own. We don't hold group functions or excursions," Russell notes. "The only food and beverage we order is a light continental breakfast on the first day, and the next three days we offer coffee and hot tea service in the mornings only. The rest of the meals are on their own."

Sedona's intimacy and beauty come with a price: It's harder to get to than some destinations. "You have to fly into Flagstaff which is expensive," Russell says. "You can fly into Phoenix but then the drive is 115 miles to Sedona, which means renting a car, etc."

Still, the town has great appeal for Institute attendees. "Our attendees are massage therapists, physical therapists, chiropractors, nurses and other healthcare workers," Russell says. "Having the red rocks and the serene atmosphere of Sedona makes for a great backdrop. Being one with nature is very appealing to our attendees."

Scottsdale

To be sure, it's not only wellness-oriented companies that find Sedona appealing. When Drusilla Pollick, CMP, manager, global accounts at HelmsBriscoe, was looking on short notice for a meeting site for a chemical manufacturer and distributor, Sedona was the first choice. But with no appropriate availability, she turned south to Scottsdale.

"As I had visited Scottsdale through the CVB and had great meetings and experience with the Waldorf Astoria brand, I sent RFPs to the Boulders Resort & Spa after researching the property. The client's director of national sales and distribution had

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 Houston, TX



been to the Boulders previously and therefore felt comfortable placing his group of 42 in the hotel.

It is, Pollick notes, an amazing setting. "This hotel is going through a brand change with Hilton, and we are excited to hear that it will be undergoing a renovation soon," she says. "It's a spectacular location in the desert. The casitas are comfortable and, like the junior suites, roomy and in beautiful surroundings. You are immersed in the sights and sounds of the desert."

"Where else can you hear coyotes, see a bobcat cross the golf course outside of your room, see quail and lizards in their natural habitat, watch sunset colors surround the mountains and hear a waterfall tumble down natural desert boulders? You can also light the fireplace in your casita, go to the spa for a massage and take a dip in the pool."

While Pollick notes that the group was a little cramped and needed additional meeting space, she says the staff was very accommodating and worked out a viable solution for the breakout rooms.

Food and catering also were excellent. "Food was rated highly. We had a great event in the Cocopelli (outdoor desert location) with a Western/Mexican theme and invited a local mariachi band to add to the festivities," she says.

While getting in and out of the Phoenix airport is easy, Pollick notes that getting to The Boulders is less so. "A drive to this location takes a little more time from the Phoenix airport, but I would highly recommend it just for the natural desert location. I have only great things to say about Scottsdale as a destination and the CVB, which has been a great partner to HelmsBriscoe and our clients, and many hotels in Scottsdale would be on my recommendation list."



Credit: Talking Stick Resort

Hallway outside Talking Stick Resort's Salt River Grand Ballroom.

Pollick and her team arranged for a bus to take attendees to one of north Scottsdale's malls featuring restaurants, retail and entertainment. She also recommends Old Scottsdale, in close proximity to many of the city's unique hotels, as a location for offsite functions.

"The Saguaro Scottsdale food is excellent (great chef) and it's close to the spring training baseball park. There's also Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort — what panoramic views. One unique offsite private venue is the Boulder House, which is catered by The Boulders Resort. Kimpton's FireSky Resort & Spa is an excellent place for food and parties by the pool, and the Omni Scottsdale Resort has a gorgeous ballroom. The Royal Palms has the most amazing outdoor dining location in the Orange Grove and intimate indoor and outdoor pool patios. There are," she adds, "too many great hotels to mention them all."

In the end, it's about the attendee experience, and Pollick says that the after-meeting survey shows that this experience was rated as one of the client's best meetings as a group.

"Scottsdale is a beautiful location, natural and relaxing. There are great hotels, a great CVB and great DMC organizations offering tons of group networking activities."

If other planners are considering Scottsdale for an upcoming meeting, Pollick has just two words: "Do it!"

A Scottsdale option that includes gaming is the AAA Four Diamond, Native American-owned Talking Stick Resort on the Salt River-Pima Maricopa Indian Reservation. The 496-room resort offers nearly every must-have amenity for corporate groups: golf at the adjacent Talking Stick Golf Club; The Spa at Talking Stick, a 13,000-sf open-air venue on the 14th floor that highlights products made with ingredients that are culturally significant to the Pima-Maricopa Indians; gaming at the onsite casino; a 650-seat Showroom; and 100,000 sf of indoor/outdoor meeting space. Distinctive among the 11 restaurants and lounges is the signature restaurant Orange Sky, located on the 15th floor with floor-to-ceiling windows and available for private events. The casino-level lounge, Palo Verde, was expanded last year.

New Mexico

Santa Fe

Larger than Sedona but smaller than Scottsdale, Santa Fe, with a population nearing 70,000, is the Southwest's mecca for art, architecture, history and shopping. All of those attributes and more played into the decision to hold Dallas-based

Southwest Airline's Claims Review meeting in Santa Fe in April. The group of 15 was based at the boutique Inn and Spa at Loretto.

"We meet semiannually at different cities throughout the U.S.," says Mary Mortensen, customer claims administration senior supervisor. "We look for venues that will allow us to focus on business matters, have teambuilding time and fun. Location for this meeting was a key factor. We had attendees coming from New York, Dallas and Houston. We especially wanted to have the 'Santa Fe shopping experience.'"

After considering several properties, Mortensen says the choice came down to three. "Since cost was a major factor, we found three properties that appealed to us because of their location, room rates and meeting space. Although the Inn's rates were somewhat higher than the others, they met the other properties' room rates, waived the charge for usage of the meeting room and seemed genuinely interested in hosting our meeting."

Inn and Spa at Loretto, a Destination Hotel, was the main site for conference meetings and functions, which worked very well. "We were impressed with the staff's attentiveness to our group," Mortensen says. "They were helpful in finding meeting materials that were shipped ahead of time. One staff member actually participated in one of our teambuilding activities. Our meeting room was spacious, seating was comfortable and the audio-visual provider was exemplary."

Mortensen has positive things to say about the inn's catering, as well, which the group used for breakfast and lunch in

the meeting room. "The breakfast menu was varied: juices, fruit, pastries, granola, yogurt, tortillas, eggs, potatoes, bacon, sausage, etc. Food that was supposed to be hot was hot, and food that was supposed to be cold was cold. Lunch was excellent. We had fresh, green salad, pasta salad, roast beef, turkey, grilled chicken and tuna, fruits and cookies. The portions were generous, and the wait staff replenished items frequently."

The only downside at the hotel, says Mortensen, was lengthy delays checking in and checking out.

Santa Fe itself provided an excellent setting for the meeting with its striking architecture and consistently good weather. And though Southwest employees flew Southwest into Albuquerque, an hour away, insurers and brokers made their own flight arrangements and flew directly into Santa Fe.

The group used three of the city's restaurants during the meeting, with mixed results according to Mortensen. The Shed topped the list with "excellent margaritas, the availability of a private dining room and excellent food and service." On the other hand, Il Piatto, says Mortensen, offers a limited/acceptable menu but no private dining and only "okay/passing service," while Santa Fe Bite has "great food and patio seating but slow service."

For planners considering Santa Fe as a meeting destination, Mortensen recommends making restaurant reservations well in advance, which will give groups more options in this city known for its exceptional Southwestern cuisine.

"Where else can you bear coyotes, see a bobcat cross the golf course outside of your room, see quail and lizards in their natural habitat, watch sunset colors surround the mountains and bear a waterfall tumble down natural desert boulders?"

Drusilla Pollick, CMP, Manager, Global Accounts
 HelmsBriscoe
 Oswego, IL



Mortensen also cautions that groups should be prepared for "poor to no cell phone coverage for certain carriers."

While that's a horror story for some attendees, others may see it as a blessing. And for those whose phones do work there's good news: Tourism Santa Fe visitor centers are now equipped with cutting-edge solar-powered charging stations for phones and other digital devices at no charge.

From its large urban centers to rural retreats, the Southwest delivers what planners and attendees value. It's business friendly yet with an abundance of extraordinary natural beauty. That's a combination that makes the Southwest hard to resist.

ing relocated and expanded to include two saloons, a stage, a dance floor and a jail where guests can be "locked up." Poorly behaved attendees beware...

Scottsdale Resort & Conference Center began a renovation in July with completion expected in September. In addition to an updated look, a new restaurant and new function space, the resort will sport a name: **The Scottsdale Resort at McCormick Ranch, a Destination Hotel**.

In Tucson, **The Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa** completed a \$30 million rejuvenation that included its public



The Inn and Spa at Loretto in Santa Fe, New Mexico

spaces, private rooms and the 60,000-sf conference space.

This summer **L'Auberge de Sedona** will undergo a renewal that will include an enhanced arrival experience, upgraded accommodations, private dining spaces, a new state-of-the-art kitchen and a new indoor-outdoor bar area. The unveiling will take place this fall.

New Mexico The **Albuquerque Convention Center** completed a \$23 million renovation in October, including a newly designed ballroom, kitchen and service corridor. The West complex has a new entrance, an entertainment deck off the ballroom, and the lower atrium was remodeled.

Visitors to Albuquerque in 2015 can be among the first to visit **Valles Caldera** when it transitions from a national preserve into one of the nation's newest national parks.

In Santa Fe, the **Eldorado Hotel & Spa** completed a renovation in June that included a refresh of the 219 guest rooms and a new 7,000-sf ballroom that accommodates 700 guests for a reception.

C&IT

New & Noteworthy

Oklahoma **Holiday Inn Express Bricktown** debuted in January and construction is set to start on two additional hotels this fall: a **Hyatt Place** and an **AC Hotel**. Already under construction and slated to open in 2016 is a **21C Museum Hotel** at the edge of the Film Row district. In the Boathouse District, the new **CHK/Central Boathouse** opened with ample rentable space indoors and out. And groups meeting in OKC in 2016 will have another teambuilding option when the Boathouse District's new whitewater rafting facility opens.

Arizona In November, Phoenix's historic **Arizona Biltmore, a Waldorf Astoria Resort**, completed a major renovation upgrading and modernizing accommodations and public spaces. The city's stellar **Musical Instrument Museum** added 3,400 sf of event space, including three private meeting rooms with full AV capability, bringing total function space to 40,000 sf.

In March, **Sheraton Mesa Hotel** debuted with 180 guest rooms and 37,000 sf of event space, including a ballroom accommodating 1,500 attendees. In May, **Boulders Resort & Spa** in Carefree was sold. Hilton integrated the resort into its Curio brand and a multimillion-dollar renovation will finish in December. **Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain Resort & Spa** is embarking on a \$10 million renovation. It includes the new Spa House accommodating eight for private retreats and will wrap up in early 2016.

In June, **The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess** completed a renovation of its 120 casitas, ideal for executive meetings, and broke ground on a project that will bring 102 guest rooms online for a total of 750. The new Sunset Beach feature pool will accommodate leisure guests and serve as a fun venue for group functions. The resort's 1880s-era Western town is be-