

Focus on:

Midwest/Great Lakes

By Kate Parham

AMERICA'S MIDWEST HEARTLAND

is a melting pot of people and places. Divided into two areas, the Great Lakes and the Great Plains, the region is known as “the breadbasket of America” for its grain production. Revered for its ethnic diversity and strong cultural traditions, many parts of the area were originally settled by European immigrants, and their influences run heavy here. It’s one of the largest regions in the country, and its cities are gaining traction for their impressive yet affordable meetings offerings.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The largest city in the Midwest, Chicago is a major hub for industry, telecommunications and infrastructure, and is the country’s third-largest convention destination. It’s centrally located, providing easy access to meeting attendees. More than 20 percent of the U.S. population lives within a 300-mile radius of the city, and O’Hare International Airport (one of two international airports in the city) is the second-busiest airport in the world. The two international airports were a key determining factor for Jessica Thurmond Pohlonski, program manager at the American Marketing Association, who recently chose Chicago as the destination for Summer Ed, one of the association’s flagship conferences. “Summer Ed has a significant international representation, so choosing a city that offers direct access to other major international hubs is a priority,” says Pohlonski.

Most large-scale conventions are held at McCormick Place, located minutes from downtown Chicago. Comprised of four state-of-the-art buildings, McCormick Place is considered the economic engine that powers the city’s entire convention and trade show industry. The Hyatt Regency McCormick Place is connected to the convention center, offering meeting planners 800 rooms, as well as banquet and event space. The AAA-rated, Four Diamond hotel will undergo a major renovation in 2013 with an \$87 million expansion that will add a new 461-room guest tower.

Although Chicago has many large hotels that house sizable meeting space, Pohlonski’s event requires a disproportionate amount of

meeting space to sleeping rooms. “This ratio imbalance can often result in higher contractual obligations on our behalf—certainly a risk that we try to avoid,” explains Pohlonski. “So, in selecting Chicago as our destination, we were able to choose from a variety of venues that meet our meeting space-to-sleeping room ratio requirements, and that are also centrally located and affordable to our attendees.”

Pohlonski recommends the Gleacher Center, a University of Chicago property, for small training courses. Larger venues, such as the Chicago Marriott Downtown or the Westin Michigan Avenue, have been great for Pohlonski’s larger conferences. But, if you want to break out of traditional conference rooms, try Chicago’s museums, of which there are more than 40 to choose from, and rank among the best in the world. The Chicago Cultural Center houses the world’s largest Tiffany art glass dome, a sparkling masterpiece created with nearly 30,000 pieces of stained glass.

“Every event should include three variables: learning, networking and fun,” says Pohlonski, who feels Chicago is one of the best cities to optimize all three components. “In my 12 years of experience in strategic events, I have to say that Chicago is truly one of the best host cities. Despite its size, it has maintained a Midwestern friendliness that is often noted by our attendees. It’s home to some of the finest cuisine in the nation, has notable on- and off-Broadway productions, great sporting venues, interesting museums, cutting-edge shops and boutiques... and a beautiful, clean and safe lakeshore. Our attendees never lack things to do when attending an event in Chicago.”

One of Pohlonski’s favorite Chicago activities is visiting Wrigley Field, home to the Chicago Cubs. “Many of our attendees will hop the transit and head up to Wrigleyville to see the stadium and experience the energy of the neighborhood,” says Pohlonski. “During season, it is one of the most fun places to go in Chicago, especially for baseball lovers.” Pohlonski also suggests The Chopping Block for hands-on teambuilding cooking classes. “We have chosen this venue for two meetings, and both were tremendously successful,” she says. Groups split up into teams to create meal



Grand Traverse Resort and Spa

▾ Facts & Figures

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Area guest rooms: 33,000
Convention center: McCormick Place
Exhibit space: 2.6 million square feet
Meeting rooms: 173

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Area guest rooms: 3,775
Convention center: Frontier Airlines Center
Exhibit space: 189,000 square feet
Meeting rooms: 28

OMAHA, NEBRASKA

Area guest rooms: 13,000
Convention center: CenturyLink Center Omaha
Exhibit space: 194,000 square feet
Meeting rooms: 16

OVERLAND PARK, KANSAS

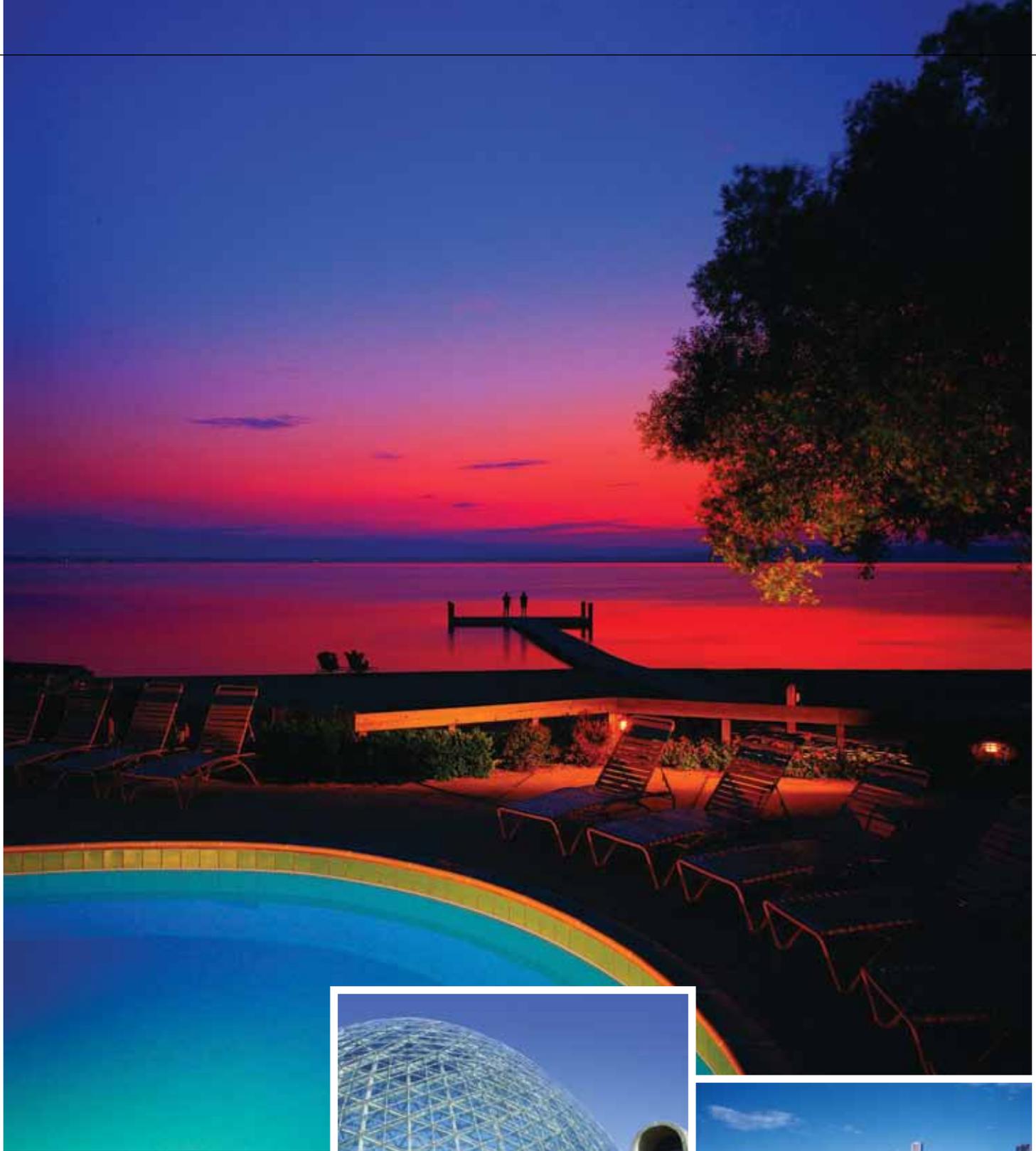
Area guest rooms: 5,200
Convention center:
Overland Park Convention Center
Exhibit space: 60,000 square feet
Meeting rooms: 7

SIoux FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

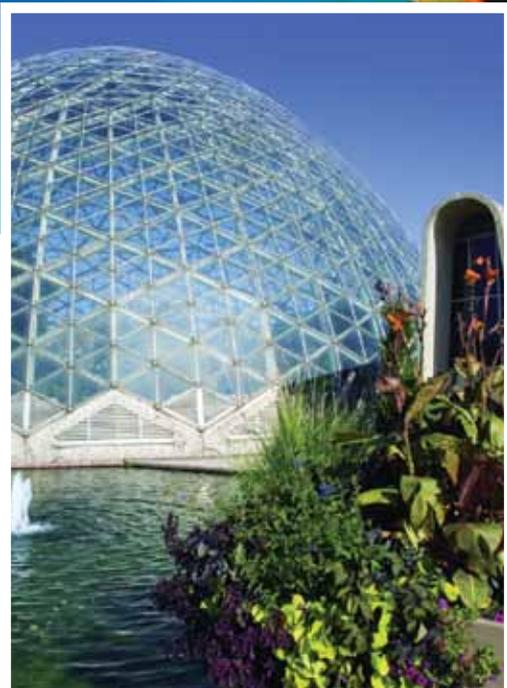
Area guest rooms: 4,100
Convention center:
Sioux Falls Convention Center
Exhibit space: 50,400 square feet
Meeting rooms: 14

TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN

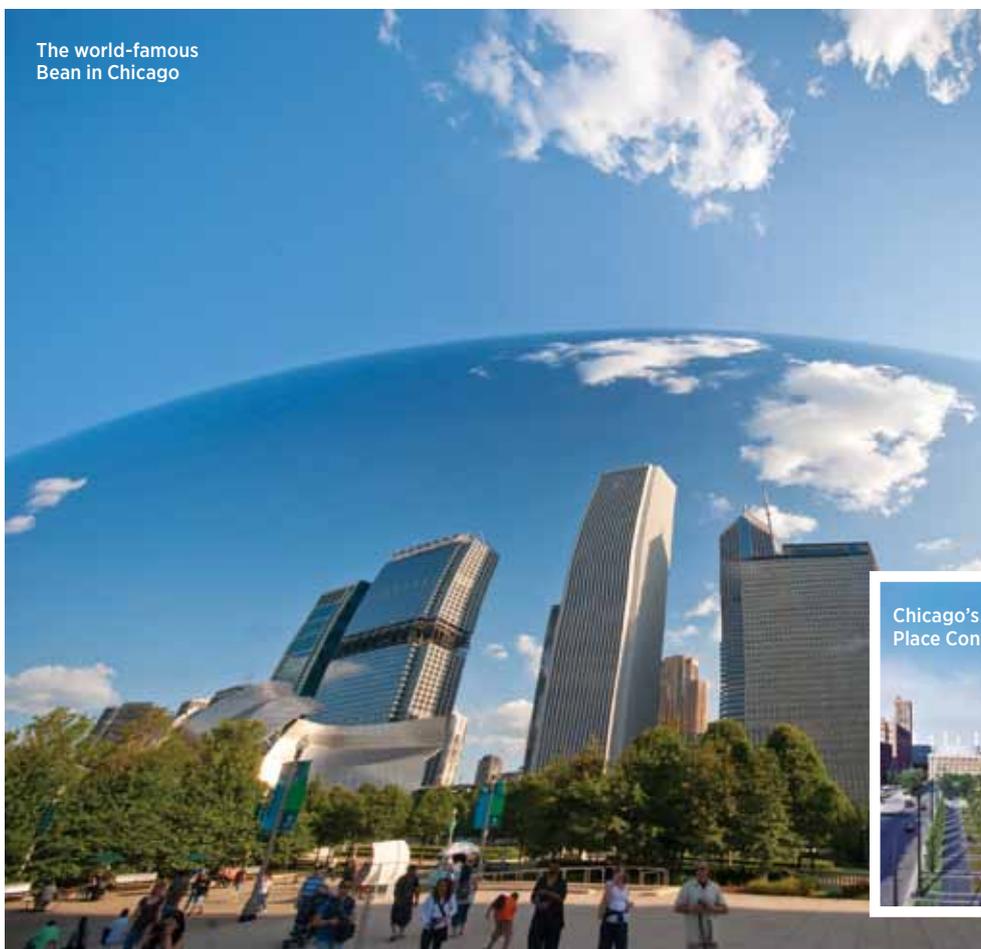
Area guest rooms: 4,000
Largest meeting space:
Grand Traverse Resort and Spa
Exhibit space: 24,696 square feet
Meeting rooms: 36



WATERFRONT VIEWS. Clockwise from top: Watch the sun set over Grand Traverse Bay (part of Lake Michigan) from the Shores Complex at the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa in Michigan; Navy Pier in Chicago extends over the waters of Lake Michigan; and Milwaukee's Mitchell Park Conservatory is known as "The Domes" for its three glass domes, each with its own climate and plant species.



The world-famous Bean in Chicago



Chicago's McCormick Place Convention Center



TIPS

Explore More

Milwaukee's Explore More Program offers discounts on lodging, dining, shopping, entertainment, events, fun and more, including discounts at the Hyatt and reduced admissions to the Milwaukee Art Museum, Discovery World, Milwaukee County Zoo and Milwaukee Food Tours.

Say Cheese

In the middle of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge in Omaha is the state line for Nebraska and Iowa, allowing visitors to be in both states at once. "It's a great photo op and a wonderful way to take a break from meetings and enjoy the outdoors," says Dana Markel, executive director at the Omaha CVB.

components, then come back together to enjoy the meal as a group. "The experience builds great team spirit and group camaraderie."

Known for its ethnic mix of people, Chi-town is home to some of the country's most distinctive cuisine, like Chicago-style hot dogs, Italian beef sandwiches and deep-dish pizza. One of Pohlonski's favorite spots to take attendees is to an authentic Chicago pizzeria. "Whether it is Lou Malnati's, Pizzeria Uno or Giordano's, our attendees light up at the thought of experiencing Chicago-style pizza," says Pohlonski.

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Located on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, Milwaukee is one city meeting planners need to put on their maps, if only for the food and festivals. There, you'll find traditional German food favorites, like sauerkraut, bratwurst and cheese curds, festivals like Summerfest, the world's largest music festival, and Brewfest, which features more than 150 craft beers and microbrews from around the globe.

"Milwaukee is what planners are looking for today: easy to get to, easy to get around, easy on the budget and easy attitude," says Brent Foerster, vice president of sales and marketing at Visit Milwaukee. One of the main attractions for meeting planners is the Frontier Airlines Center, which houses the 12,700-seat U.S. Cellular Arena. Across the street is the recently renovated, \$42 million, 4,100-seat Milwaukee Theatre. It's connected by skywalk to two hotels: the 729-room, AAA Four-Diamond Hilton Milwaukee Downtown, which recently completed an \$11.5 million multiphase renovation, and the 483-room Hyatt Regency Milwaukee, honored as Best Hotel of the Year by its owner company.

Northwestern Mutual has held its annual meeting in Milwaukee for more than a century. This year, more than 11,000 attendees from around the country descended on the city for the meeting. "We hold it in Milwaukee every year because our home office is here, but we also just know that this is a great city to hold a meeting in," says Jim Lavold, director of



The Bradley Center in Milwaukee



Old Market district in Omaha, Neb.



Visit

Dahl Art Center

The Dahl Arts Center in Rapid City, S.D., received a \$7.8 million renovation in January 2009. It's the premier western South Dakota arts center for contemporary visual arts, arts education and performing arts, and provides an off-site setting for events. A public facility owned by the city, the Dahl has several flexible and affordable spaces, including a 280-seat event center (which seats 200 for a sit-down dinner), three visual arts galleries, an interactive children's hands-on gallery, and adult and children's art classrooms.

meetings. "Sometimes it's overlooked because you think it's not a major city like New York or L.A., but it's a great city for meetings and people can come here and just see what our hometown is all about."

Because of the large size of this meeting, Lavold uses many of the downtown facilities, from the Bradley Center to the Frontier Airlines Center and the Milwaukee Art Museum, "which is quite striking as it sits on the shores of Lake Michigan," says Lavold, who has also used all four of the major hotels downtown for meetings, lunches and lodging. "Since our attendees come every year, they get familiar with their personal favorites, but we work hand in hand with the visitors bureau to highlight what's new each year," says Lavold. "There's always a festival, like on the Summerfest grounds, where every weekend there's an ethnic festival."

One of Lavold's favorite attractions in the city, especially for large meetings, is the Milwaukee County Zoo, where Northwestern Mutual holds its kick-off party in the evening. "Not only do guests have full access to the zoo, but it's a great venue for holding a big event because we can

put up the tents out in the parking lot, with food and bands," he says. "And it's not just another building, so it's a bit different. A lot of people take the time and walk around the zoo."

Milwaukee has made the transformation from Brew City to New City. From the futuristic wings of the Milwaukee Art Museum soaring along the Lake Michigan shoreline to lively, redeveloped downtown neighborhoods like the Historic Third Ward and Brady Street, this city continues to evolve. Other special venues include the Milwaukee Public Museum, Discovery World and the Harley-Davidson Museum.

OMAHA, NEBRASKA

Founded in 1854, Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska. In the heart of the Midwest, it is one of the most convenient destinations in the country (a reasonable plane ride from either coast to Eppley Airfield, the city's airport). "We've heard time and time again how easy it is to get around the city and how helpful people are. There is truly a Midwestern hospitality that you feel the minute you arrive," says Dana Markel, executive director at the Omaha

Convention and Visitors Bureau. Today, Omaha is growing as a creative, innovative destination where new ideas mixed with experience create amazing results, Markel adds. Home to five Fortune 500 companies (including ConAgra Foods and Berkshire Hathaway), Omaha is known for its high value and eclectic array of entertainment and attractions that appeal to a wide variety of interests, from Lincoln Memorial Stadium (home to the legendary Husker football team) to some of the finest Midwest wineries and Smithsonian-caliber museums.

Recently, the riverfront and downtown received more than \$2 billion in new development, in addition to the \$22 million, 3,000-foot-long Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge that crosses the Missouri River, giving pedestrians a spectacular, almost airborne experience. Connected to more than 150 miles of nature trails, the bridge plaza features a small amphitheater and 26 dancing water jets, making the location perfect for festivals, concerts and events.

CenturyLink Center, Omaha's convention center that's linked to a 450-room Hilton, is an

impressive location for events. Kelly Dingwell, food show coordinator for Affiliated Foods Midwest, recently held the company's two annual food shows at the center. "It was very convenient for our guests to be able to walk across the skywalk to attend our event," says Dingwell, who used two of the show halls, along with meeting space and the ballroom for the awards ceremonies. The cohesive team approach provided by the hospitality community was an essential selling point for Dingwell. "Our guests really enjoy their experiences in Omaha, as the city is very family-friendly, convenient and accommodating," says Dingwell. "From the restaurants and hotels, to the quaint shops in the Old Market and the Henry Doorly Zoo, you get to experience the great Midwest hospitality."

The Durham Museum, located in Omaha's historic Union Station (the first art-deco train station in the nation), is another venue worth considering. This architectural masterpiece offers visitors a hands-on glimpse of the region's rich history, where visitors can explore trains trackside and hop on board President Harry S. Truman's historic train car. In terms

of meeting space, The Great Hall is one of the most breathtaking aspects of The Durham, with 65-foot-high ceilings and 13-foot-tall copper and glass chandeliers. "Convention groups consider this a magnificent, unique and versatile off-site venue," says Markel.

If you're looking for a teambuilding activity, consider Omaha's Hot Shops Art Center, an eclectic warehouse where you can witness more than 80 artists create cutting-edge art. The spot offers Come Create It classes, where groups have hands-on experiences and create pieces alongside the artists. "It puts people in a different environment and allows for some unique interactions they might not normally have in a traditional setting," says Markel.

OVERLAND PARK, KANSAS

Overland Park, the second-most populous city in Kansas, offers large-scale meeting facilities in a laid-back, casual, suburban atmosphere. Consistently ranked in the top 10 of CNNMoney and Money magazine's 100 Best Cities to Live in the United States, Overland Park also recently has been recognized as one of the best places



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About 15 minutes south of downtown Kansas City, Overland Park dates back to 1905, when the city was founded by William B. Strang Jr. In 1909, Strang sponsored the first airplane flight west of the Mississippi (yes, the Wright brothers performed here). Today, Overland Park is one of the largest suburbs of Kansas City, and is home to some of the largest companies and firms in the U.S., like Sprint and Black and Veatch.

Overland Park is known for its suburban hospitality, modern facilities, entertainment and attractions in a central and safe location, says Liron BenDor, vice president of marketing at Visit Overland Park. With 35 hotels, a state-of-the-art convention center with 237,000 square feet of flexible space (and an attached 412-room Sheraton, which adds an extra 25,000 square feet of meeting space) and myriad off-site options, "there's nothing cookie-cutter about our destination," says BenDor. "[And], since we are home to mega companies, our hotels are designed to meet the needs and exceed the expectations of the business traveler."

Blish Mize Connor, communications director for Blish-Mize Company, chose Overland Park to host a recent buying market, which attracted nearly 2,000 people. She picked Overland Park because "it was a great central meeting point for our customers." The Overland Park Convention Center, which has more than 1,000 free parking spaces on-site, "is really willing to fulfill any request, and they're also very flexible for last-minute changes," says Connor, who was also impressed with the Sheraton, which is connected to the center. "It's amazing. The rooms are clean, reservations are professional, and Kelly Kirby, who is the events manager, runs a flawless show over there." Connor also recommends many of the nearby restaurants, like Garozzo's and Bristol Seafood Grill. "Our staff loves the family style dinners at Garozzo's. It is lively, the wine flows and the food is awesome," she says. "Overall, Overland Park itself offers so many options, and if you are looking for something else, it can't be more than a 15-minute drive away."

Another noteworthy meeting space is the Johnson County Community College.

On campus is the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, the only contemporary art museum in Kansas, which offers a variety of high-tech auditoriums and breakout rooms for groups up to 300 people. For those that enjoy the outdoors and need a break from the boardroom, there's also the 17-mile Indian Creek Bike and Hike Trail that runs along many of the hotels around the area, perfect for attendees who like to get exercise during their stay. Overland Park's Deer Creek Golf Club recently won the 2011 Kansas City Visitors' Choice Award in the Favorite Golf Course category. Of course, visitors to Overland Park are near everything Kansas City has to offer, including the new, world-renowned, \$366 million Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts (opened September 2011). The site, designed by architect Moshe Safdie, is the perfect post-convention destination. For outdoor teambuilding, consider the Overland Park Arboretum and Botanical Gardens.

SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

Chartered in 1856 along the Big Sioux River, Sioux Falls is South Dakota's largest city. The



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lack of state corporate income tax has resulted in a number of financial companies, like Wells Fargo and Citigroup, making their home there. Known for its health care—the city has four major hospitals—Sioux Falls experienced a cultural renaissance during the last several years. “Sioux Falls is a great place for meetings because we offer all the amenities of a big city without the 30-minute drive from airport to hotel,” says Krista Orsack, director of sales and marketing at Sioux Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau. It’s easy to get around in town with public transit options that include the Sioux Area Metro and the Sioux Falls Trolley, and Sioux Falls also is easily accessible from every direction, within a day’s drive of most Midwestern metropolitan cities. The Sioux Falls Regional Airport is served by five major airlines and offers connections to more than 200 domestic cities and international destinations.

One of the most popular attractions in Sioux Falls is the city’s namesake, Falls Park. The 123-acre park features a triple waterfall, visitor’s information center and five-story observation tower, cafe and historic ruins, all located on the

banks of the Big Sioux River. The CVB staff can help secure Falls Park for a welcome reception or other special event.

Another special venue is the Washington Pavilion, located downtown in a renovated historic building. It houses the three-story Kirby Science Center, Wells Fargo CineDome and six art galleries in the Visual Arts Center. The Great Hall inside is home to the South Dakota Symphony and is known for attracting popular Broadway shows and musical talent filling a year-round schedule.

For something more traditional, consider the Sioux Falls Convention Center, which offers more than 71,000 square feet of flexible meeting space, and is attached to an 8,000-seat arena and 243-room Sheraton hotel. Last November, residents approved the construction of a \$115 million events center, scheduled to be completed by fall 2014. The multipurpose arena will add 30,000 square feet of space to the existing convention center and arena, amounting to 132,000 square feet of meeting space within the entire complex, allowing for 180 standard trade-show booths.

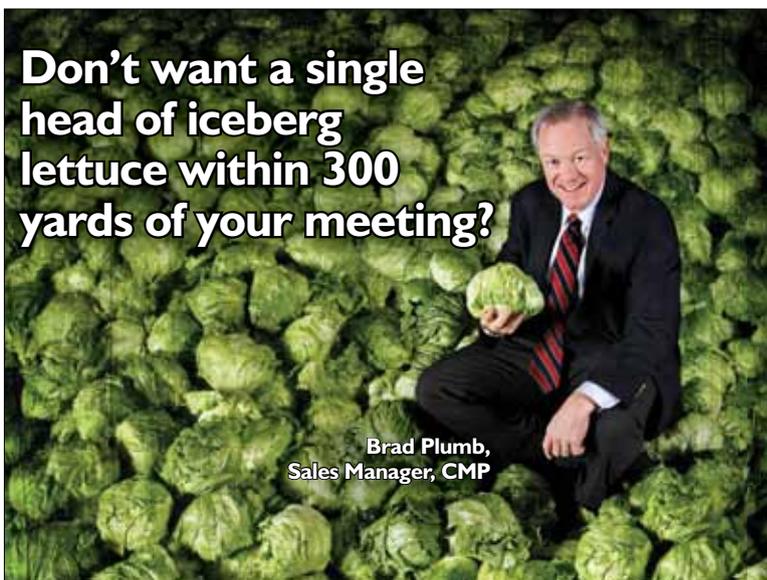


Meet

JW Marriott Indianapolis

The JW Marriott Indianapolis Downtown opened its doors last February, completing the Marriott Place development project, which occupies seven acres in downtown Indianapolis. A collection of five Marriott properties, the new \$450 million complex includes a total of 2,248 rooms, all of which are connected to the newly renovated Indiana Convention Center. The hotel has 54 meeting rooms and 104,000 square feet of event space, including a 40,500-sq.-ft. grand ballroom, the Midwest’s largest hotel ballroom.

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Kathy Hansen, marketing assistant at Raven Industries, needed a local meeting space to bring guests, so she chose Sioux Falls for the “friendly people, the size of the city, and the continuous growth and the diversity.” Plus, Hansen likes to “show attendees where Raven products are made and the friendly staff who make it all possible.”

Hansen used the Sioux Falls Convention Center for her meeting: “The space, technology, food and support [we received made] our meeting a success,” she says. Another favorite of Raven attendees: the Sioux Falls Pheasants baseball games. “They are within walking distance and offer a great party deck to host our group event with great food, drinks and fun,” says Hansen, who also recommends the Prairie Green Golf Course and the Downtown River Greenway. “It’s one of the newest and most appealing to me, and it’s really becoming a beautiful place to take a walk, bike ride or just relax for a bit.” For other teambuilding activities in the area, Hansen suggests Crossfire Paintball or clay shooting at Hunter’s Point.

TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN

Traverse City, located on Grand Traverse Bay, a long, deep inlet of Lake Michigan in the northwest corner of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula, has “small-town charm seasoned with true North sophistication,” says Brad Van Dommelen, president of Traverse City Convention and Visitors Bureau. Although Traverse City is relatively small both in terms of population (15,000) and geography (8.4 square miles), more than 160,000 people are considered part of the Traverse City area.

Despite its northern latitude (Traverse City sits on the 45th parallel, halfway between the Equator and the North Pole), the area has a surprisingly moderate climate, thanks to the warm Lake Michigan waters that surround it, explains Van Dommelen. Early farmers discovered they could grow delicate fruit like peaches and cherries on the slopes above Grand Traverse Bay, which gave Traverse City its title as the nation’s Cherry Capital. The city holds an annual weeklong Cherry Festival during the first full week of July, near cherry harvest time, attracting approximately 500,000 visitors.

Long celebrated for its pristine lakes and streams, verdant forests and miles of golden beaches, the Traverse City area has 234 miles of continuous Lake Michigan shoreline, with more than 95 inland lakes at least 50 acres in size. It is undoubtedly an outdoor-oriented community, winning fans for its laid-back lifestyle, diverse cultural life and astonishing culinary scene.

Between the region’s picturesque port towns, hidden byways and historic downtown, Traverse City is a great place to indulge the appetite, with a thriving farm-to-table movement, a growing group of talented chefs and an acclaimed wine industry. Year after year, the city is celebrated as one of the country’s leading foodie towns. In fact, Bon Appetit named it one of the five best foodie towns in 2010.

“We’re able to provide a meeting environment that people actually want to immerse themselves in,” says Van Dommelen. “What we have in Traverse City is a truly beautiful, relaxing setting with lots of extra experiences that aren’t available in most convention destinations. We call it ‘food for the soul.’”

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Many groups find they get record attendance at Traverse City meetings, likely because it's a place where attendees like to bring their families. "People feel comfortable bringing their spouse and kids along when they come to Traverse City, because it's safe and there's a lot for them to do," says Van Dommelen. Karen Reed, organizational development consultant for DTE Energy, agrees. She has held meetings in Traverse City many times throughout the years.

"Every season offers many attractions for our employees, [from] skiing and snow-tubing in the winter [to] golfing, color tours, and outdoor activities [in the] summer and fall," says Reed, who receives very positive feedback from employees after meeting in the city. "Having so many wonderful attractions offered year-round for our employees in the Traverse City area gives the feel of something new each time you visit." "After a long day of business meetings, I believe our business travelers enjoy options to have a spa treatment, take a shuttle downtown to a brewery, drive a short distance to a local casino, plan out a relaxing winery tour, or just sit and relax," says Reed.

Although the city doesn't have a dedicated convention center, there are dozens of options for special meeting venues, like Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, the area's largest full-service resort hotel. With 585 rooms, the resort offers 86,500 square feet of meeting space for groups of up to 2,500, including the Governors' Hall with 20,160 square feet of group space with 20-foot ceilings, state-of-the-art conference equipment and a projection booth.

Cheryl Snyder, executive assistant and meeting planner for Emergency Consultants Inc. (which has been based in Traverse City for 40 years), says the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa is their number one choice in town, although she also recommends the Courtyard by Marriott, the Bayshore Resort and Park Place Hotel. "Our guests like it when they are close to other amenities such as shopping and restaurants," says Snyder. The Grand Traverse Resort's location 10 minutes from the Cherry Capital Airport also makes for a convenient trip for attendees.

Roxanne Johnson, executive assistant at the National Association of Professional

Insurance Agents, chose the Grand Traverse Resort for a recent meeting because of its amenities and beautiful surroundings, and she was even able to bring her meeting in under budget due to the affordability of the property. Johnson says some members expressed hesitation about going to what they thought was a remote location, but once they arrived there, many said they would definitely go back to the area on their own for family vacations.

There's a plethora of teambuilding options in Traverse City, too. From The Tall Ship Manitou, which offers sailing on the Great Lakes, to golf (Golf Magazine selected Traverse City as one of America's top six golf regions) to canoe and kayak excursions, there's something for every type of personality. One of the most popular excursions is into the wine country. The Leelanau and Old Mission peninsulas are dotted with more than 27 vineyards and wineries that consistently bring home awards from regional, national and international competitions. Almost all are open for tastings and tours.



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