Central connections. Left: Milwaukee Museum of Art; Above, from top: Old Market Entertainment District in Omaha, Neb.; Overland Park Convention Center in Kansas; and kayakers in Traverse City, Mich.
MEMORABLE MIDWEST

**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 casual, fun and quirky. Hosting an event in one of the following cities could make your meeting casual, fun and quirky, too.

**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 one of the association’s flagship conferences called Summer Ed. “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 just 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 more than 800 sleeping rooms, as well as banquet space and conference center. The Four Diamond, AAA-rated hotel will get a considerable revamp 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 Marriott Downtown Chicago or the Westin Michigan Avenue, have been great for Pohlonski’s larger conferences. But, if you want to break out of traditional conference rooms and discover a different kind of meeting space in Chicago, try the museums, of which there are more than 40 to choose from. They 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.”

Go to [connectyourmeetings.com/places](http://connectyourmeetings.com/places) for more on Midwest destinations.

**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: 10,473
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, plus a 25,000-square-foot ballroom
► Meeting rooms: 7

**SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA**
Area guest rooms: 4,100
Convention center: Sioux Falls Convention Center
► Exhibit space: 100,000 square feet
► Meeting rooms: 12

**TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN**
Area guest rooms: 4,000
Largest Meeting Venue: Grand Traverse Resort and Spa
► Exhibit space: 85,000 square feet
► Meeting rooms: 34
One of Pohlonski’s favorite activities in Chicago outside of meetings 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 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, the second most populous city in the United States, 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
The $140 million Hilton Columbus Downtown is set to open this September. The convention headquarters property will be connected via skybridge to the 1.7 million-sq.-ft. Greater Columbus Convention Center and Nationwide Arena. With the new addition, Columbus will be able to offer multiple convention and trade show opportunities in a bustling downtown location. With more than 530 guest rooms and a 12,000-sq.-ft. Grand Ballroom, the sleek, modern hotel anticipates achievement of both LEED and Green Seal certifications. And it’s conveniently located: less than 10 minutes from the Port Columbus International Airport.
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Mindy Lallier,
Senior Sales Manager

Areana and recently renovated $42 million, 4,100-seat Milwaukee Theater. It’s connected by skywalk to two hotels: the 721-room, AAA Four Diamond Hilton Milwaukee City Center, which is undergoing an $11.5 million multiphase renovation, and the 488-room Hyatt Regency Milwaukee, honored as Best Hotel of the Year by its owner company.

Deborah Guess, director of operations at the National Association of Teachers of Singing, recently used the Hilton hotel for the NATS and the Music Teachers National Association Collaboration Workshop. “We were very pleased with the hotel and [its] service, as well as [its] facilities,” says Guess. “[Also,] some of our members are Canadian and they appreciated us choosing a venue that was easy for them to travel to and not so far away,” Guess also says Milwaukee’s great restaurants, meeting space at the hotel and overall friendly atmosphere contributed to a successful meeting experience.

Milwaukee has made the transformation from Brew City to New City. From the futuristic wings of the Milwaukee Art Museum soaring dramatically along the spectacular Lake Michigan shoreline to lively, redeveloped downtown neighborhoods like the Historic Third Ward and Brady Street, there’s an undeniable energy in this evolving city.

“Especially in tight economic times, it’s important to highlight Milwaukee’s affordability and accessibility,” says Ross H. Hoff, conference director at International City/County Management Association, which recently held its annual conference there. “The city’s Old World traditions are alive and celebrated even as the city embraces the 21st century through endeavors such as freshwater technologies, sustainability ventures and world-class businesses.”

Hoff used the Frontier Airlines Center for the conference. “It’s well designed and a good fit for a meeting of ours,” he says. The conference had 2,500 main registrants, 400 accompanying partners and 133 exhibiting companies. “Everyone we worked with—especially the local host committee volunteers, hospitality community, caterers and other vendors—were very enthusiastic, professional and the model of ‘Midwest Nice.’”

TIP
Go Above the Treetops
Discover the thrill of flight high above the forest floor at Lake Geneva Canopy Tours, just outside Milwaukee. Plan for meeting attendees to go on an exhilarating two-hour canopy tour featuring eight ziplines, five skybridges and three spiral stairways.

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ICMA also hosted several major social events at various venues, including the Milwaukee Public Museum, Discovery World and the Harley-Davidson Museum. “The three venues made for very successful social events and should be considered by anyone planning a meeting in Milwaukee,” says Hoff. Adds Foerster: “From high-tech displays to fresh and saltwater aquariums, to the dock of Wisconsin’s official tall ship, Discovery World’s maritime heritage meets 21st-century cool. The Pilot House atop the Aquatarium offers a 90-foot diameter rotunda surrounded by an 18-foot outdoor balcony—a 360-degree view that will blow you away.”

Omaha, Nebraska
Founded in 1854 by Native Americans, Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska. In the heart of the Midwest, the city is one of the most convenient destinations in the country; it’s just a couple hours plane ride from either coast to Eppley Airfield. “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, eclectic array of entertainment and attractions that appeal to a wide variety of interests, from the 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 Bridge that spans across 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.

KNOW | Who Calls Omaha Home
Home to billionaire Warren Buffett, Omaha hosts Buffett’s annual Berkshire Hathaway shareholders meeting, which attracts approximately 30,000 people from across the globe every year. Omaha has been home to the NCAA College World Series for more than 60 years and counting, attracting the best in college sports. Last summer, the series moved from Rosenblatt Stadium to the new TD Ameritrade Park. Omaha is home to the world’s largest indoor desert under the world’s largest geodesic dome.
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.

CenturyLink Center, Omaha’s convention center that’s linked to a 450-room Hilton, is an impressive location for events. Kay Chelena, vice president of The Management Office in Charlotte, N.C., and conference manager for the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, recently planned the association’s 2011 annual conference at the hotel. “[The space allowed] us to host the majority of our room block and all the meeting/exhibit space under one roof,” says Chelena. “Accessibility and affordability were major factors as well, [and] you can’t get much closer to the airport. The complimentary hotel shuttles were excellent.”

The cohesive team approach provided by the hospitality community was an essential selling point for Chelena. “The [CVB], hotel management and convention center staff truly worked together with [us] to provide support and services that made the 2011 conference a huge success.” The conference agenda featured some off-site events, including an opening event held at the historic Orpheum Theatre and another event at the Henry Doorly Zoo, home to one of the world’s largest indoor rainforests (where attendees can have dinner), the world’s largest indoor desert and the world’s largest nocturnal exhibit.

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
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. In addition to 54 meeting rooms and 104,000 square feet of event space, the JW Marriott Indianapolis also houses a 40,500-sq.-ft. Grand Ballroom, the largest hotel ballroom in the Midwest.

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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 town. 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 to raise your kids and one of the best places to grow up.

About 15 minutes south of downtown Kansas City, Overland Park dates back to 1905, when the city was the site for 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 more than 34 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 20,000 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.”

Samantha Raper, public relations and marketing director at Takuya Jay Inoue, chose Overland Park to host the Naka-Kon Anime Convention in February. She picked Overland Park for the location and convenience of the Overland Park Convention Center, which has more than 1,000 free parking spaces on-site. Raper was also impressed with the CVB’s cooperation in helping her plan the convention, which helped her coordinate a shuttle service for attendees to go to the local shopping centers and restaurants during the convention. This is the first year Naka-Kon will be held in Overland Park, and Raper plans to return to the city again in 2013.

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 the attendees who like to get exercise during their stay. Overland Park’s Deer Creek Golf Club recently won the category of 2011 Favorite Golf Course by the Kansas City Visitor Choice Awards.
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, the Overland Park Arboretum and Botanical Gardens or the Deanna Rose Children’s Farmstead are great for adventurous scavenger hunts.

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

Chartered in 1856 on the banks of the Big Sioux River, Sioux Falls is South Dakota’s largest city. The 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. Teresa G. Alfaro, CMP, meetings manager at Volunteers of America, was very pleased with her recent event at Falls park. “[Everything] was perfect, from the weather, to the food, to the entertainment and the fireworks over the falls,” she says. “Once you get to Sioux Falls, you don’t want to leave,” says Alfaro, who loved the warmth of its people. Alfaro was also impressed with the level of support she received from the CVB when planning her meeting. Staff members helped her secure Falls Park for a welcome reception, worked with her on the booking deadline, made sure all permits and requirements were in place, and attended pre-planning meetings.

The Washington Pavilion, located in a beautifully renovated historic building in downtown, houses the three-story Kirby Science Center, Wells Fargo CineDome and six art galleries in the Visual Arts Center. The Great Hall inside is known for attracting popular Broadway shows and musical talent filling a year-round schedule and is home to the South Dakota Symphony. Alfaro organized the Volunteers for America awards dinner on the stage overlooking the auditorium of the Washington Pavilion of Arts and Science.
She says it’s one of only a few facilities in the world to bring together under one roof the performing arts, visual arts, interactive science and educational opportunities.

“This is a first-class venue in a first-class city and perfect for an event such as an awards dinner, a reception, or a dance.”

For something more traditional, consider the Sioux Falls Convention Center, which offers 100,000 square feet of flexible meeting space, and is attached to an 8,000-seat arena and 245-room Sheraton hotel. In November, residents approved the construction of a $115 million event center, scheduled to be complete 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, allowing for 180 standard trade-show booths.

**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 174,000 people are considered part of the Traverse City area.

Despite its northern latitude (Traverse City sits on the 45th parallel, exactly 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. Near the time of cherry harvest, the city holds an annual weeklong Cherry Festival during the first full week of July, 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, its diverse cultural life and its 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 rated it No. 5 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.’”

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.

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 660 rooms, the resort offers 85,000 square feet of meeting space for groups of up to 2,500, plus a Governors’ Hall with 20,160 square feet of group space with 20-foot ceilings, state-of-the-art conference equipment and a projection booth.

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. Its location 10 minutes from the Cherry Capital Airport made for a convenient trip for attendees. “PIA members loved the Grand Traverse Resort,” says Johnson. “Everything was very convenient, and the banquet and events staff was wonderful to work with. The variety of wonderful restaurants on property was very pleasing to our members, and the views at sunset from Aerie [Restaurant] were spectacular.” Even better? Johnson was 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.

—Kate Parham