

## Cover Story: Conference Centers We Love



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By Kinley Levack

Here are a few conference centers that rank as planner favorites for their beautiful facilities, phenomenal settings, and consistent attention to detail, but what really resonates with planners is a staff that bends over backwards to make a meeting a complete success

### **The Hearth of the Matter**

Throw another log on the fire. Or two, or three—or six. The two-story fireplace in the lobby of the Skamania Lodge in Stevenson, WA, can handle it. The Lodge consistently gets rave reviews from planners who

laud its proximity to the Portland, OR, airport, flexibility for groups, and attentive staff, to say nothing of its setting in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area and variety of outdoor activities.

"The lobby, with its fireplace and rocking chairs, is superb for small groups to use as breakouts during meetings," says Joan Eisenstodt, who is so enamored of Skamania that she vacations there as well. The IACC-approved facility has 23 meeting rooms and more than 22,000 square feet of meeting space in addition to more than 40,000 square feet of outdoor event space that is available seasonally.

Stacy Weber, who chaired the 2007 OR/WA MPI Cascadia Conference at Skamania, says, "I was completely blown away by the service ... We had 219 MPI members in attendance and not one single complaint about the venue—personally, I think that's a miracle."

"It is exhilarating for me to meet in that locale," adds Bonnie Wallsh, chief strategist with meeting management and training firm Bonnie Wallsh Associates, LLC, in Charlotte, NC. "Most of all, I love the inspiration I feel just by being there."

### **To the Manor Born**

Can a conference center named Rizzo offer a group the elegance of a country manor? But of course. At the Rizzo Conference Center in Chapel Hill, NC, the retreat-like setting on 28 acres provides an attractive backdrop, and the center's crown jewel is the DuBose House, a Georgian-Revival mansion that serves as a dining venue for guests, says Joe Blake, director of sales and marketing.

It may be owned by the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School and have been designed for training and meetings, but the property has not overlooked the importance of down time and aesthetics. "It has great relaxing areas for the attendees, including darts, pool tables, and amazing refreshments," says Jean Travers, HelmsBriscoe regional manager in Apex, NC, who books a meeting at the center annually.

When it's time to get down to business, the center boasts 20,000 square feet of conference space in 41 rooms, including three multilevel classrooms, 21 breakout rooms, and 10 study rooms. Blake adds that

"meeting planners especially comment on how easily accessible the staff is during conferences, and appreciate not having to search for assistance when needed."

### **Are You Being Served?**

Newly reopened after an extensive renovation, Chaminade in Santa Cruz, CA, offers planners 12,000 square feet of space in 12 meeting rooms, as well as outdoor event options. "It is a fabulous facility because of its flexibility in creating positive learning environments," says Wallsh. "One room was set up with comfy couches and chairs for attendees to meet in and [brainstorm]. There are several walking paths where attendees can exercise and become energized while sharing ideas. In the evening, attendees can gather around an outdoor fireplace to mellow out." The renovation added a lobby with a fireplace for even more options for small groups or individual relaxation.

"The setting is lovely and peaceful, and the food is excellent, but what makes it for me is the staff—many of whom have been there a long time. They ask questions, listen, and then help make the learning experience just so for groups," says Eisenstodt.

"It's all about the staff," agrees Sherrie Huneke, director of sales. "We're low-key, we're flexible, and we'll do anything to service our guests."

### **Package Deal**

"They get 'it,' " says Eisenstodt of the Summit Executive Centre in Chicago. " 'It' being education, learning, environment, service, relationships—all of it. From day one, they put together a package that works for meetings."

The Summit just wrapped up a major renovation that gutted the existing space and, among other improvements, added energy-efficient lighting and controls that allow planners to regulate the temperature in meeting rooms; the facility also moved away from offering bottled water, and now provides water coolers for attendees. Private spaces were added to allow for conference calls or privacy for attendees who are nursing; "It's a common question that people ask, so we thought it would be a good thing to address in planning the new space," explains Director of Sales John Potterton.

The facility will finish an expansion project in May that will add 13,000 square feet of meeting space to its current 21,000 square feet.

### **Museum Piece**

The William F. Bolger Center, in Potomac, MD, is home to 70,000 square feet of event space, 75 meeting rooms, 477 guest rooms, and two business centers, not to mention the only permanent Smithsonian exhibit at a hotel. Erika Heatherly Powell, a planner with Global Knowledge, in Cary, NC, calls the facility "great," and adds that the location is ideal because the center is set on 83 acres, but is still convenient to Washington DC and the area's airports.

"I think the biggest thing that sets us apart is our people. Any property can be proud of its physical attributes—nice meeting rooms, extravagant accommodations, or great food, but our people really do make the difference," says Charita Evans, global sales manager for Dolce International at the Bolger Center.

While on site, attendees can take advantage of the fitness center, one-and-a-half mile walking, jogging, and biking trail, a teambuilding ropes course, or outdoor spaces that lend themselves to informal barbecues or swankier affairs.

### **Rooted to the Environment**

"Green" is nothing new to the Lied Lodge and Conference Center in Nebraska City, NE. Owned by the Arbor Day Foundation and sitting on the 260-acre Arbor Day Farm, Lied Lodge uses energy-efficient lighting, heating, and cooling systems, and has an extensive sustainability program. Since the Arbor Day Foundation is a nonprofit, "our profits go back to planting trees and bettering the environment," explains Denise Munderloh, director of sales and marketing, who adds that Lied Lodge offers a discount to conservation-focused groups.

"There are apple orchards galore, and the center itself is just stunning," says Bobbie Connolly, member services coordinator with Prairie Health Ventures in Lincoln, NE. She adds, "They care about their customers, and that comes across by the interaction of the staff with you as the meeting planner. I've been going there for 13 years and will continue to do so."

Lied Lodge has 14,000 square feet of meeting space over 14 rooms, as well as seasonal outdoor space and historic barns on property that serve as ideal venues for meals or receptions.

### **By the Sea**

Seascape Resort, on Monterey Bay in Aptos, CA, lures groups with 13 ocean-view conference rooms—part of the property's 17,000 square feet of meeting space.

"Seascape is unique in that we own the beach the resort overlooks. Our beach is wide and sandy—part of a 17-mile ribbon of beach that runs from Santa Cruz to Monterey," explains Tom Blackman, Seascape's director of sales and marketing. "We offer full-service catering for events on the beach, and our signature event pairs specialty cocktails and creative hors d'oeuvres with beach fires—a clam and lobster bake with the 'must-haves,' corn on the cob and baked potatoes, capped with elegant dessert selections. Having the beach available to us in this way allows meeting planners to book the off-site dinner without going off-site."

Although area competition for groups is steep, "once they've experienced Seascape, they want to only book Seascape," says Peggy Young of Santa Cruz, CA-based meeting management firm, Peggy Young & Associates. "Seascape truly is a gem."

//Sidebar//

### **More Centers We Love:**

The Solution Center in Durham, NC, boasts 20,000 sf of space, concierge services, and a loyalty program that offers planners rewards or allows them to donate to a charity of their choice. Erika Heatherly Powell, a planner with Cary, NC-based Global Knowledge, adds that "their customer service is unmatched."

With a whopping 118 meeting rooms and 1,042 guest rooms, The Q Center in St. Charles, IL, is one of the largest conference centers in the country. Bonuses like free Internet access in guest rooms and a 28-person team of AV and IT professionals add to the appeal.

Seattle's Bell Harbor International Conference Center has 100,000 sf of waterfront space, including the 300-seat Bay Auditorium, which is modeled after the United Nations and offers six simultaneous interpretation booths; the Rooftop Plaza affords views of Seattle's skyline and the mountains, and Stacy Weber, with Moss Adams, LLP, in Seattle, praises the center's "multi-use space."

In addition to 45,000 sf of meeting space, Lansdowne Resort, in Lansdowne, VA, offers 36 holes of championship golf, a 12,000-sf spa, and an aquatic complex, and "proves a conference center does not have to be business-only to have a successful meeting experience," says Liz Jackson, founder of the

## Meetings Management Group in Falls Church, VA.

Located on the Babson College campus in Wellesley, MA, the Babson Executive Conference Center offers 22,500 sf of meeting space, including four tiered classrooms and a video teleconferencing suite. The center takes particular care to provide excellent food and a variety of dining options.

"We love this place," says Powell of the Black Canyon Conference Center in Phoenix, AZ, adding that her attendees "rave about the food." The center, with 21 meeting rooms, focuses on making the booking process seamless. "For a lot of people booking with us, [planning] is just a part of their job; so many of our clients wear a lot of hats," explains Susan Armentrout, regional director of sales and marketing.

Harris Conference Center in Charlotte, NC, can play host to up to 500 attendees, and "the staff here is top notch. They treat your meeting as if it was their own," says Alison Harding, also a planner with Global Knowledge.

"The staff is like family and is incredible to work with," says Bonnie Wallsh, about the Hamilton Park Conference Center in Florham Park, NJ. The facility, with 27,000 sf of event space, runs a "Destination Earth" campaign that encompasses a variety of environmentally friendly initiatives.

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