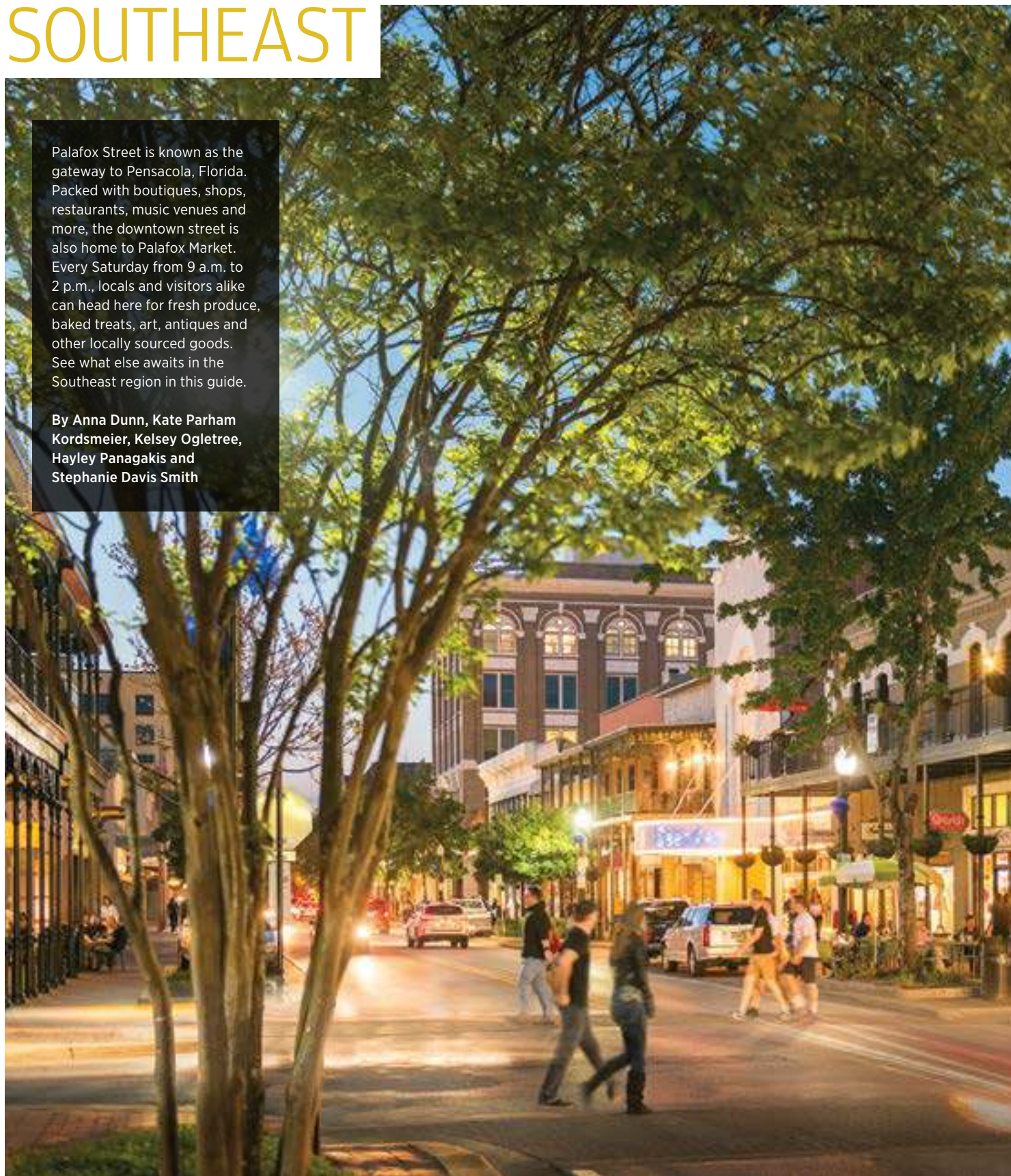


SOUTHEAST

Palafox Street is known as the gateway to Pensacola, Florida. Packed with boutiques, shops, restaurants, music venues and more, the downtown street is also home to Palafox Market. Every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., locals and visitors alike can head here for fresh produce, baked treats, art, antiques and other locally sourced goods. See what else awaits in the Southeast region in this guide.

By Anna Dunn, Kate Parham Kordsmeier, Kelsey Ogletree, Hayley Panagakis and Stephanie Davis Smith



MICHAEL DUNCAN/DUNCAN MCCALL INC

Barber Motorsports Park



Porsche Experience Center



Alabama Shakes It

What's old is new again in downtown **Birmingham**, a Southern city catching its second wind.

Birmingham, Alabama, has a serious case of nostalgia. Seemingly overnight, the city's downtown district is seeing historic hotel renovations in properties that haven't drawn attention in decades. "Everyone is moving back downtown from the suburbs," says Barry Hoehn, director of convention sales and marketing for the Greater Birmingham CVB. Hoehn intimates the great migration is having a positive effect on the area's meetings industry, which is evident in the events the city recently hosted for American Academy of Optometry, United Steelworkers, International Free and Accepted Modern Masons, and more.

Take Redmont Hotel Birmingham, which is undergoing a \$20 million overhaul to become a Curio Collection by Hilton property. Built in the 1920s, it will reopen in April 2016 with 120 rooms, two elegant ballrooms, two boardrooms and a rooftop terrace. Only five blocks away, a \$45 million project ushers in two Marriott flags in 2016: Empire Hotel will have 117 rooms, meeting space and a rooftop bar, while the adjoining former Alagasco headquarters will be a 120-room hotel.

Cobble these three together, and Birmingham will have more than 350 new hotel rooms within a short walking distance of each other. These properties are a stone's throw from 89-year-old The Florentine, which is another recently rehabbed historic structure. The new large event space, owned by Corretti Catering, can seat 300 or accommodate 450 for a reception and has an on-site cafe, bar and catering team. While in Forbes named Birmingham the country's most affordable city in which to live, it's also a place where big dollars are being spent. —*Stephanie Davis Smith*

All-Access Pass

Groups come to **College Park** for the convenience, but leave pleasantly surprised thanks to new opportunities and improvements.

What do Chick-fil-A, Delta Air Lines and Porsche have in common? Each of these companies has corporate headquarters in College Park, Georgia, better known as the Atlanta Airport area due to its claim to the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, which saw more than 96 million passengers in 2014.

They also each have interactive experiences for groups meeting in the area. Learn about the origins of the chicken sandwich at Chick-fil-A Home Office Backstage Tour; be immersed in aviation history at Delta Flight Museum, which is housed within two renovated 1940s aircraft hangars with 68,000 square feet of event space; or use the simulator center for teambuilding at Porsche Experience Center, which can host receptions for up to 600 in its main atrium.

Large groups can take advantage of Georgia International Convention Center, the world's only convention center directly connected to a major airport, via a free, three-minute SkyTrain ride. Find 150,000 square feet of exhibit space on one level and metro Atlanta's largest ballroom, measuring 40,000 square feet. Nearby hotel properties include Marriott, Sheraton and Westin. —*Anna Dunn*



Soul City

Hungry attendees can get a taste for **Charleston's** craveworthy Southern cuisine in trendy event spaces.

Charleston, South Carolina, may be most famous for its history and golf courses—it is home to the first golf club in the country, South Carolina Golf Club, formed in 1786—but its award-winning dining scene has since made it the culinary capital of the Southeast, thanks in large part to James Beard Award-winning chefs like Sean Brock (Husk), Robert Stehling (Hominy Grill) and Mike Lata (FIG and The Ordinary) who call it home.

Today, meeting planners can easily integrate Charleston's edible story into events. At James Beard semifinalist Jeremiah Bacon's The Macintosh, you'll find an outdoor courtyard space for alfresco events. The covered patio can seat up to 50 and is outfitted with fans and fire pits, so you never have to worry about inclement weather. Likewise, The Macintosh's sister restaurant, Indaco, serves wood-fired pizzas and handmade pastas on its private patio, which can accommodate up to 60 for reception-style events and also has a sound system.

To really up the foodie ante, check out The Cedar Room at the new Cigar Factory (the building is circa 1880), which opened in September. The airy, 13,000-sq.-ft. entertaining space has original wood columns, floor-to-ceiling windows with views of Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge and modern Southern catering (we recommend the bacon-wrapped dates stuffed with goat cheese). —*Kate Parham Kordsmeier*



It's Easy Being Green

Charlotte's parks and ease of transportation will breathe new life into your next event.

The next Southern city on the rise? Charlotte, North Carolina. Not only does it have nearly a dozen hotel projects in the works, which will bring more than 1,700 new rooms to the city, but as home of the sixth-busiest airport in the world, Charlotte is top of mind for travelers. About 60 percent of the U.S. population lives within a two-hour flight of Charlotte, and the airport—which recently got an upgraded roadway system, a new hourly parking deck and a rental car facility, and has future plans for a lobby expansion and international terminal—is only 7 miles from the convention center.

On top of the curve, Charlotte's green space is growing too, with the 4-acre First Ward Park slated to open in early 2016 and a 26-mile Cross Charlotte Trail addition planned for the beloved Little Sugar Creek Greenway. Eco-minded planners can bring attendees to the 5-acre Romare Bearden Park, which opened in Uptown near the new BB&T Ballpark (home of Minor League Baseball's Charlotte Knights) in 2013, to take in a local festival or participate in free outdoor fitness classes. Or, book a Dugout Suite at the ballpark, where you can arrange an impressive buffet and a visit from the Knights mascot. Looking for outdoor teambuilding? Head to the U.S. National Whitewater Center, home to the largest man-made whitewater river in the world, where attendees can go climbing, zip lining, paddleboarding and rafting. —*KPK*



Congaree National Park

Carolina Calling

Columbia is a nature lover's paradise with many parks doubling as event spaces.

This South Carolina college town is chock-full of outdoor event space, from city parks to rooftop terraces to trails built for teambuilding. During downtime, attendees can head to the 167-acre Riverfront Park to take in one of its many festivals, concerts or free outdoor movie nights. The park's Coble Plaza can also hold several thousand people across its amphitheater and boardwalk for a private event. Another green space option is Saluda Shoals Park, with a 5,000-sq.-ft. conference center with naturally lit meeting rooms overlooking the river. Encourage your group to snap selfies at one of the most photographed views in the city across from the Governor's Mansion.

To showcase Columbia's beauty, host a reception at the 18th-floor Rooftop Lounge at Sheraton Columbia Downtown Hotel, which has some of the best views in the city; or head to The Attic rooftop bar in the Five Points area, which serves two dozen craft beers. For teambuilding and rejuvenation, Congaree National Park has several walking trails that wind around some of the tallest trees in eastern North America, while the 16-plus miles of roads and trails at Harbison State Forest are popular for biking excursions. —KPK

Plugged In

Tech-focused facilities make **Greenville** a smart choice for meetings.

If planners should know one thing about Greenville, says Diane Wilson, a sales manager at VisitGreenvilleSC, it's that this small city does big meetings really well. But beyond its recent buzz—ranking on lists of America's quirkiest cities, best downtowns and must-visit places by brands like Travel + Leisure and MSN Travel—South Carolina's sixth-largest town excels in the field of technology.

Greenville was named among the 13 fastest-growing tech hubs by Uncubed, a company connecting tech entrepreneurs to skills, content and jobs. In addition to major tax incentives for the sector put in place by the state of South Carolina, Greenville businesses like The Iron Yard (the world's largest code school, headquartered in Greenville) and Next Innovation Center (a 60,000-sq.-ft. collaborative innovation hub, which opened a second space, Next on Main, downtown in August) are playing their part in this tech renaissance. Companies meeting here can draw on resources from both centers, which may serve as a lure to IT companies such as Synnex Corporation, ScanSource and MWM Corporation, which each met in Greenville in 2015. —*Kelsey Ogletree*



Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center



Resort Redux

Stretch your budget in the heart of resort country in **Kissimmee**.

Trade the resort prices and crowds often found in Orlando and look instead at its next-door neighbor, Kissimmee, Florida. Centrally located to the state's best theme parks and entertainment options (Walt Disney World is 2 miles away) and only a half-hour's drive from Orlando International Airport, Kissimmee is a meetings destination that's as affordable (after a significant revamp this year, the city is enticing planners with a \$4,100 incentive) as it is accommodating.

Expect more than 1 million square feet of total meeting space spanning 300-plus individual venues, including newly renovated hotels such as Park Inn by Radisson Resort & Conference Center Orlando, which has complimentary parking and rooms overlooking Disney's Animal Kingdom. Or consider Embassy Suites by Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista South, where you'll find 40,000 square feet of meeting, prefunction and outdoor patio space alongside free cooked-to-order breakfast and self-parking, plus a complimentary evening reception.

For something different from Disney, guests can explore art and technology at the new Crayola Experience at The Florida Mall, which has 25 interactive stations (a bonus for attendees with families in tow); or cool off at Westgate Town Center Resort & Spa's new Ship Wreck Island Water Park, which has a pirate ship with spray guns, multiple water slides, a lazy river and 16 private cabanas. —KPK

SkyWheel



A New Dawn

New hotels, meeting venues and attractions are creating a renaissance in **Myrtle Beach**.

With nearly 100 golf courses and an abundance of attractions, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, has long been known as a golf destination and vacation spot for leisure travelers. But with recent developments—like the 100,000-sq.-ft. Myrtle Beach Sports Center that opened in March, the multimillion-dollar renovation of Myrtle Beach International Airport that added two more gates in late 2015, more hotel inventory with added properties like the 100-suite Homewood Suites Oceanfront Resort & Conference Center opening in 2017, and attractions popping up like wildfire—Myrtle Beach is positioning itself as a revamped meetings destination.

Attendees won't have to travel far for off-site activities or downtime in Myrtle Beach. Attractions within an 8-mile radius of the convention center include TicketReturn.com Field at Pelicans Ballpark; the SkyWheel and boardwalk; and Broadway at the Beach, an entertainment venue with shopping, dining, mini golf, and other attractions like Ripley's Aquarium and Palace Theatre, with seating for more than 2,600 and special rates for groups of 15 or more. —Hayley Panagakis



Flying Colors

Pensacola is an aviation hub with postcard-worthy beachside event venues.

Not only is Pensacola, Florida, home to some of the most beautiful beaches in the country, but the city also plays host to a naval air station, which lends itself to group experiences like front-row seats to the Blue Angels' U.S. Navy Flight Demonstration and museum tours suitable for the whole family. At the National Flight Academy, guests can go through training at the world's largest simulated aircraft carrier, which can also be arranged as a teambuilding activity, or explore more than 150 aircraft, watch IMAX movies and experience flight simulators at the free National Naval Aviation Museum, the largest of its kind in the world.

Take advantage of Pensacola's location with outdoor event venues overlooking the water. Consider Vince J. Whibbs Sr. Community Maritime Park, which encompasses Blue Wahoos Stadium, or one of the city's bayfront amphitheatres at sites like Big Lagoon State Park, Pensacola Beach Boardwalk or the Gulfside Pavilion on Pensacola Beach. Or, book room blocks at a waterfront hotel, such as the newly renovated SpringHill Suites Pensacola Beach, one of few SpringHill Suites located directly on a beach. —KPK