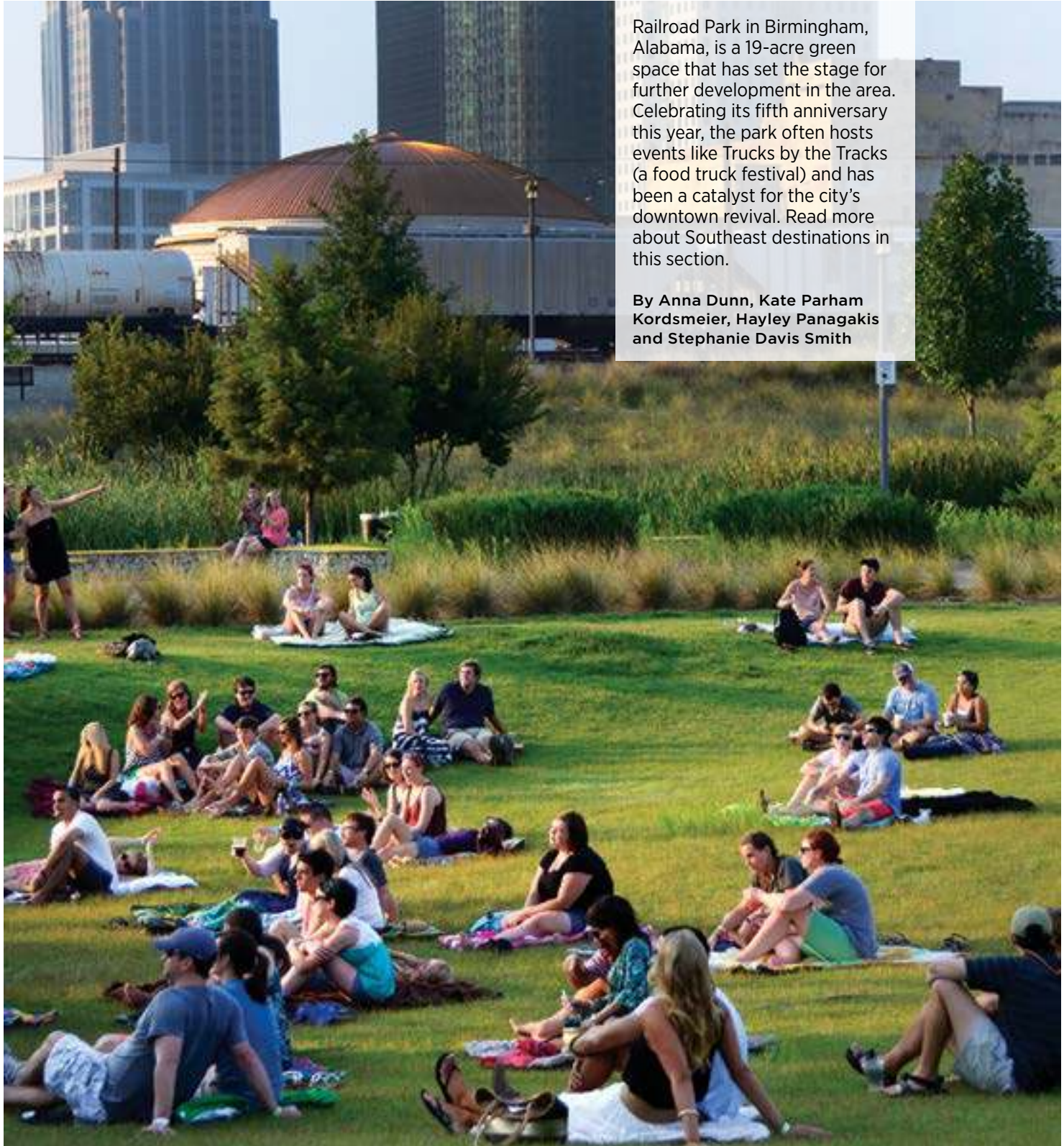


SOUTHEAST



Railroad Park in Birmingham, Alabama, is a 19-acre green space that has set the stage for further development in the area. Celebrating its fifth anniversary this year, the park often hosts events like Trucks by the Tracks (a food truck festival) and has been a catalyst for the city's downtown revival. Read more about Southeast destinations in this section.

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



Clockwise from left:
Downtown; Lyric Theatre.



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, National Speech & Debate Association, 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 2015 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

[CASE STUDY]

The National Association of the Deaf held its annual leadership training conference in Birmingham at the Sheraton Sept. 24-26. While the conference is mainly for NAD members—including deaf and hard-of-hearing advocates, professionals, interpreters, government employees and agencies—it also attracts a number of deaf and hard-of-hearing business owners who wish to network and attend workshops.

Angela Ellman, conference coordinator, says the NAD board selected Birmingham for the first time this year. "It is a city with deep civil rights history and a large deaf community," she notes. An estimated 210 attendees gathered for three days of workshops and plenary sessions, plus a meet-and-greet dinner held at Mugshots Grill & Bar. Ellman says she encouraged guests to visit Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, as well as the world's largest cast-iron statue at Vulcan Park & Museum.

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 15,000

Nearest airport:
Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International

Convention center:
Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex

Meeting space:
100,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 74

COMING IN 2016

The downtown Parkside District will get a dual-branded Hilton Garden Inn and Home2 Suites, adding 210 rooms to the area.

The former Thomas Jefferson Hotel is undergoing a \$22 million renovation that will include a restored lobby, ballroom and event space by summer 2016.

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. —*Kate Parham Kordsmeier*

[CASE STUDY]

For more than a dozen years, the North Carolina Home Builders Association has held its annual expo and conference in Charlotte, and for good reason: The Raleigh-based association appreciates Charlotte's central location for its five state markets, as well as the city's ample space to hold more than 6,000 attendees, 400 booths, 50 seminars and 13 system-built homes. "There are few cities that have the space where you can actually put houses on the floor," says Deborah W. Alford, director of exhibitions and education, who also cites the center's elephant doors as extremely accommodating.

"The center has the perfect amount of space, and we like being able to have our attendees break from seminars upstairs during lunch to visit the expo floor; plus there are so many hotels and restaurants within walking distance of the convention center," reports Alford, who recommends the Omni downtown. "If money is no object, I prefer the ease of the Omni, as they have valet parking and a bellman; but we've also used The Westin and Hilton Garden Inn and had no complaints," she says.

A word to the wise: Let your drive-in guests know in advance they'll spend upward of \$20 per day for parking in Charlotte, says Alford, also noting that the CVB was extremely helpful with providing signage, maps and online links.

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 32,000

Nearest airport:
Charlotte Douglas International

Convention center:
Charlotte Convention Center

Meeting space:
125,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 37

COMING IN 2016

A nine-story, 230-room Embassy Suites will open across from the NASCAR Hall of Fame and Charlotte Convention Center.

A 20-story, dual-branded hotel tower at EpiCentre, set to open in 2016, will include a 182-room AC Hotel and a 120-room Residence Inn.



Clockwise from left: U.S. National Whitewater Center; BB&T Ballpark; Charlotte Convention Center.



Clockwise from right: Interior at Indaco; The Spectator Hotel.



Soul City

Hungry attendees can get a taste for Charleston's crave-worthy 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 and barbecue pulled pork on brioche buns). —KPK

[CASE STUDY]

There are few U.S. cities with a history as compelling as Charleston, South Carolina. Just ask Angela C. Caraway, president of The Caraway Management Group. She chose the city for the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education National Conference in April because of its history and many commemorative attractions, from plantations to City Market to a plethora of fascinating tours. It didn't hurt that Charleston also has a reputation for drawing a record number of registrations for many conferences held there, says Caraway.

"Angie Day with the CVB was most helpful and embodied that Southern hospitality we all hear about," says Caraway, who is based in North Carolina. "She created a microsite to help our attendees prepare for their arrival, which meant I didn't receive as many calls as I normally do. I urge other planners to do so as well." Caraway, who booked a room block at the Embassy Suites connected to the convention center, praised the hotel's food service. "I did not receive one complaint from our attendees, [and despite] a rise in food allergies and preferences, the hotel's chef accommodated every request," she says.

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 15,800

Nearest airport:
Charleston International

Convention center:
Charleston Area
Convention Center

Meeting space:
150,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 24

NEW IN 2015

The Spectator Hotel opened its doors in July as a retro-glam boutique retreat complete with complimentary bike rentals and free in-room breakfast.

The 1,800-seat Martha and John Rivers' Performance Hall at the newly renovated Gaillard Center opened in October.



Clockwise from top:
Porsche Experience Center;
Delta Flight Museum.

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 association 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*

[CASE STUDY]

The 20th annual Konkani Sannelan will be held at Georgia International Convention Center in July 2016, bringing in an anticipated 2,000 attendees to College Park. Konkani members belong to a linguistic community that migrated from western India to North America. "The two-and-a-half-day event highlights sumptuous Konkani food, entertainment, seminars, workshops and much more," says Chaitanya Kamath, the event's publicity chair. "It facilitates the intermingling of Konkanis in North America with the hope to showcase and protect our cultural diversity," he adds. Attendees will stay in two properties adjacent to the convention center: SpringHill Suites Atlanta Airport Gateway and Atlanta Airport Marriott Gateway, which will also play host to the convention's medical symposium and youth activities. Kamath says College Park was chosen because of its proximity to the airport and downtown Atlanta.

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 8,000

Nearest airport: Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International

Convention center: Georgia International Convention Center

Meeting space: 400,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 32

COMING SOON

The former 3 Palms hotel will reopen in early 2016 as the 246-room Red Lion Hotel Atlanta International Airport.

College Park and nearby East Point were selected as Google Fiber cities, with improved Internet capabilities currently under construction.

Construction began in October on the 204-room Renaissance Atlanta Airport Gateway Hotel, which will have 6,500 square feet of meeting space. It's expected to open in March 2017.

Carolina Calling

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

The capital city of South Carolina sits at the convergence of three rivers lined by a shady river walk, meaning this 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 at Finlay Park.

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

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 11,550

Nearest airport:
Columbia Metropolitan

Convention center:
Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center

Meeting space:
57,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 15

COMING IN 2016

Columbia's first boutique hotel, a five-story Aloft, is slated to open.

The convention center will get new carpet and furniture with built-in charging stations.

Spirit Communications Park, future home of minor league baseball team the Columbia Fireflies, plans to open along with retail, restaurants and a hotel.

Clockwise from right:
Soda City Market; Riverfront Park;
kayaking on the Congaree River.



BRETT FLASHNICK; COLUMBIA, SC CVB

Gaylord Palms Resort



Resort Redux

Stretch your budget in the heart of theme park country in Kissimmee.

Skip the resort prices and heavy 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 meeting 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



Horseback riding
on the beach

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 kid-friendly 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 will add two more gates by the end of the year, 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

Blue Angels
beach show



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 amphitheaters 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 the brand's few properties located directly on a beach. —KPK

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 9,700

Nearest airport: Pensacola International

Convention center: Pensacola Bay Center

Meeting space: 33,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 12