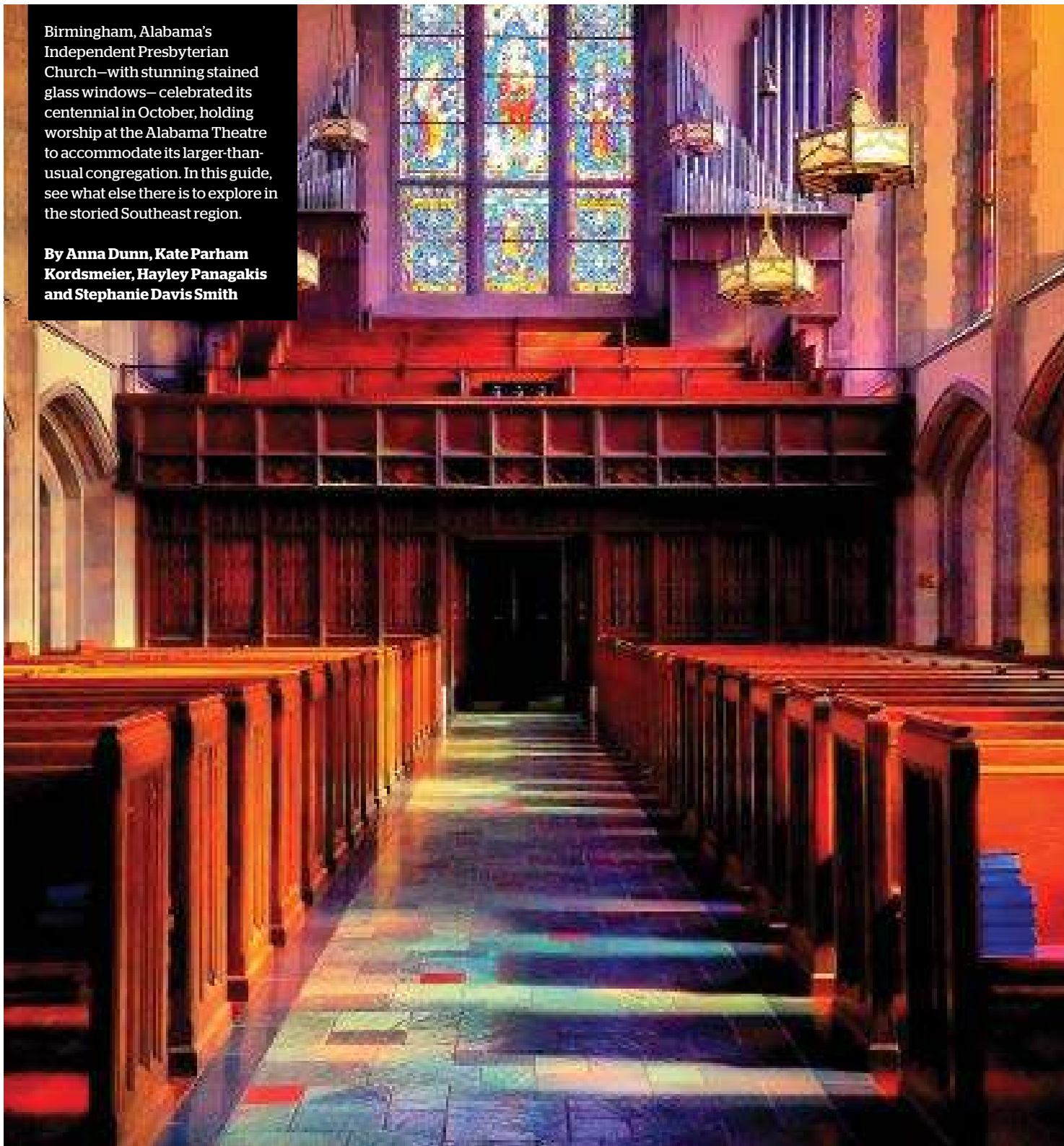


Southeast

Birmingham, Alabama's Independent Presbyterian Church—with stunning stained glass windows—celebrated its centennial in October, holding worship at the Alabama Theatre to accommodate its larger-than-usual congregation. In this guide, see what else there is to explore in the storied Southeast region.

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





From top: Barber Motorsports Park; Regions Field.



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]

"I'll be back," the famous catchphrase from "The Terminator" movies, is a sentiment echoed by planner Marsha T. DuPont, deputy director of conventions, meetings and planning for National Baptist Convention, USA Inc., after holding a meeting in Birmingham. Her group will convene there for the second time in January 2016 for its Mid-Winter Board Meeting.

Around 3,500 delegates from the Southeast region will gather at Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex and the adjacent Sheraton. DuPont, who is based in New York, flew in for a three-day site visit in November for the January event. "Mike Gunn, senior vice president of the CVB, and his team have been outstanding," she notes.

Attendees will fill up the Sheraton, The Westin, The Tutwiler and DoubleTree hotels. While no off-site events are part of the program, attendees will have leisure time to experience Birmingham's exceptional shopping and dining, says DuPont.

➤ 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.

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]

Visiting Billy Graham's family homestead and stopping to nosh at The Graham Brothers Dairy Bar were two highlights of the National Christian Counselors Association annual conference held in Charlotte this year.

Over two days in October, 225 religious counselors from around the world gathered at Sheraton Airport Hotel Charlotte for education sessions and fellowship. "I liked everything about the Sheraton—most of all the staff and their willingness to work with our food-and-beverage needs," says Jason Ferrill, administrative services manager at Sarasota Academy of Christian Counseling, who plans conferences for NCCA.

Ferrill scheduled buses to take attendees to The King's Kitchen & Bakery—a nonprofit restaurant in Charlotte also operating as a ministry—for a group outing on the second night. Started by chef Jim Noble, a 30-year restaurant industry vet, the establishment serves customers like a typical restaurant, employing staff in need of a second chance.

Ferrill opted for a first-time event in Charlotte for its central location to a large portion of the organization's membership and to try something new. "The weather was nice and the people warm and welcoming," added the planner to his list of kudos. —*SDS*

➤ 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 top: Bechtler Museum of Modern Art; U.S. National Whitewater Center; NC Music Factory.



THE BECHTLER MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; PATRICK SCHNEIDER; VISIT CHARLOTTE/CRVA

Clockwise from right:
 Chicken and waffles at Husk;
 The Cedar Room event space;
 Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge.



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 gatherings. 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 reception-style 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]

Twenty-nine years ago, Scott Carter began Hearts On Fire Youth Conference in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and attendance hit 11,000 attendees in 2015. Feb. 12-13, 2016, will mark the fourth time HOF has had a second location in Charleston.

In 2015, about 700 youth attended HOF at Lightsey Chapel Auditorium on the campus of Charleston Southern University. “Charleston is a destination city,” says Judy Steele, event coordinator for Hearts On Fire Ministries. “The number of churches within a 300-mile radius makes it a great location for the event.”

The group has used the same hotels since the beginning: Wingate by Wyndham as the host hotel on CSU’s campus, Fairfield Inn & Suites Charleston North/University Area, Hampton Inn & Suites North Charleston-University Blvd and Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites Charleston-North.

While Steele doesn’t usually take youth off-site for post-conference events, she often takes volunteers downtown to Hyman’s Seafood or Charleston City Market. “The downtown area and the waterfront are beautiful,” says Steele. “Plus, the weather in Charleston is great, even in February.” —SDS

➤ 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.

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 and Delta Air Lines have in common? Both companies have 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.

Both also have interactive experiences for groups meeting in the area, which is 10 minutes south of downtown Atlanta. Learn about the origins of the chicken sandwich and pose with the famous cows during a playful photo op at Chick-fil-A Home Office Backstage Tour; or 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.

Groups can also 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. The venue is flexible for events from small religious meetings to large worship services thanks to 150,000 square feet of exhibit space on one level and metro Atlanta's largest ballroom, measuring 40,000 square feet. Nearby hotel properties, including a Marriott, Sheraton and Westin provide a total of 8,000 guest rooms. —*Anna Dunn*



From top Delta Flight Museum; Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.



[CASE STUDY]

The 20th annual Konkani Sarmelan 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: 3

COMING IN 2016

➤ The former 3 Palms hotel will reopen 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.

Soda City Market



COLUMBIA SC

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



From top: Bobcat kitten at Wild Florida Airboats & Wildlife Park; world's tallest skycoaster at Fun Spot America.



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 near 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*

[CASE STUDY]

Good weather, sufficient housing options and access to a major airport were the deciding factors that drew National Christian College Athletic Association's Division II Soccer Championships to Kissimmee in 1997. Eighteen years later, Kissimmee has proven itself as a team player. "Today, those same attributes remain... [but with] the increased support of the Central Florida Sports Commission and Experience Kissimmee folks, we have a winner," says Dan Wood, NCCAA's executive director, who brought nearly 1,500 players and fans to the city in November for the 2015 Division II Championships and will head there again in 2016.

The soccer championships were held at Austin-Tindall Regional Park, but the NCCAA has also used the 3,400-seat Kissimmee Civic Center for its Women's Volleyball Championships. "[Both staffs] almost become NCCAA employees for the week," says Wood about his experience working with the venues. "They know tourism and embrace faith-based events. We are a shoulder season calendar event that brings significant economic impact to the area."

Outside of game play, the NCCAA partnered with Orlando-based ministry Cru for participants to serve the local community through Christian service projects including sports clinics for youth, food-packing projects, spending time with seniors, and Christmas toy and sock drives. —*Hayley Panagakis*

➤ QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 50,000

Nearest airport: Orlando International

Largest meeting venue: Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center

Meeting space: 400,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 58

NEW AND COMING SOON

➤ Magic Village Resort, a concierge-style community, is set to open by January. The resort will have three- and four-bedroom homes available for group rental, plus a full-service restaurant.

➤ Mango's Tropical Cafe will open by January. The 55,000-sq.-ft. restaurant will have live entertainment including a celebrity impersonator and Latin-inspired performances.

Captain Hook's Adventure Golf



BRIAN GOMSAK

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. —HP

QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms: 89,000

Nearest airport: Myrtle Beach International

Convention center: Myrtle Beach Convention Center

Meeting space: 250,000 square feet

Meeting rooms: 17

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 Pensacola Bayfront Stadium (home to the minor league Blue Wahoos), 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



Left to right: Pensacola Bayfront Stadium; T.T. Wentworth Jr. Florida State Museum; Pensacola Beach sign; Pensacola coastline; Blue Angels aircraft.



➤ QUICK FACTS

Area guest rooms:
9,700

Nearest airport:
Pensacola International

Convention center:
Pensacola Bay Center

Meeting space:
33,000 square feet

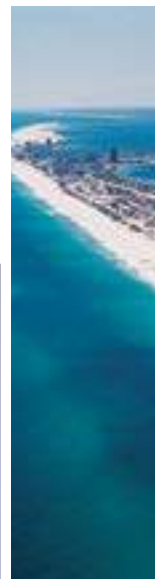
Meeting rooms: 12

COMING IN 2016

➤ North Davis Highway will add a Candlewood Suites and Home2 Suites by Hilton, and a Holiday Inn Express is expected in downtown.

➤ Renovations are underway at the 123-room Hilton Garden Inn Pensacola Airport Medical Center, with updates expected to be completed by March.

➤ Holiday Inn Express & Suites W I-10 will complete a renovation of its public meeting spaces and 64 guest rooms by spring.



MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER, VISIT PENSACOLA

[CASE STUDY]

Portofino Island Resort—a condominium-style, beachfront property with 762 two- and three-bedroom units—learned that bigger is better when it hosted nearly 2,400 children and adults for the annual Second Baptist Church High School Beach Retreat in June. It took careful coordination with the planners, as well as several site visits, to ensure everything from worship services to outdoor adventures ran smoothly for the group, says Jessica Jensen, director of corporate accounts and special events for the resort, noting Portofino’s average group size is up to 500 people. Since youth outnumbered adults five to one, 24-hour patrol officers supervised the property to ensure the safety of attendees.

After the success of hosting Second Baptist Church, Portofino is putting itself on the radar for large events. In 2017, the 28-acre resort will add another 12 acres to its portfolio, which will include the development of a conference center. —HP

