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# CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

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## Golf & Spa Resorts

Planners Rate Select Properties PAGE 14

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Jay Demme is Director of National Meetings at RSM US, the title sponsor for The RSM Classic, held on Sea Island Resort's Seaside (pictured) and Plantation golf courses.

Spectacular sunsets make for memorable meetings at the Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa in Fort Myers, Florida.

# Florida

The Sunshine State Checks All the Boxes That Planners and Attendees Want and Need

By Derek Reveron

From Miami to Jacksonville and from Naples to Destin, Florida is a shining example of what planners and attendees need and want for successful meetings, incentives and events. Fortunately, the Sunshine State is developing more of everything as new-builds are in the works, and many venues are renovating and/or expanding. In addition, key destinations are improving their entertainment options, adding more exciting attractions, culinary hotspots and recreational opportunities — all the while boosting their marketing efforts.

Their efforts are paying off big time. Some destinations are setting booking and hotel occupancy records, and launching new marketing efforts to boost results even more:

- During 2016, Jacksonville's occupancy grew 4.7 percent. February 2017 was Jacksonville's 40th consecutive month of RevPAR growth, according to a report by STR.
- In 2016, Palm Beach County's number of room nights sold through groups and meetings increased a record 94 percent, according to Discover The Palm Beaches.
- During the first two months of 2017, Tampa Bay posted a record \$70.6 million in hotel revenues, up 18 percent over the previous year, according to Visit Tampa Bay. In 2016, the region recorded a 6.5 percent growth in hotel revenue. Destinations also are racking up kudos. For example, in Southwest Florida, *Fodor's.com* included Sanibel and Captiva Islands on its list of America's Most Beautiful Barrier Islands. *U.S. News & World Report* named Sanibel Island one of the Top 10 family beaches in the U.S.

**Island Beauty**

Sanibel is home to one of the top properties on Florida's Southwest Coast, the Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa in Fort Myers, which recently hosted the annual Executive Conference of Rochester, Minnesota-based AgVantage Software Inc. It was the first time the two-day meeting was held

at a Florida destination, says Lori Campbell, conference manager for AgVantage.

Why did AgVantage select the Sanibel Harbour Marriott Resort & Spa? "We chose this specific resort mostly for the beautiful meeting rooms," says Campbell. "For example, the welcome reception was held in a glass octagonal room (Island Room) with a surrounding veranda during sunset. All of our breakfasts and lunches were also held in the Island Room. People could easily step outside for fresh air."

The company also used a smaller ballroom, with a tropical view of palm trees, for meetings. And guests enjoyed networking and holding discussions in the numerous spaces both indoors and outdoors.

The layout of Sanibel Harbour fit perfectly with the meeting's objectives. "Our main meeting goal is making a connection between our managers and customers," says Campbell. "A casual, laidback, relaxed atmosphere is a good place for people to make those connections and solidify those relationships. Some of our customers have been with us for 30-40 years, and we never want to take that for granted."

Top-shelf service helped attendees feel appreciated. "All of the food and beverage servers both for our group events and in the bar were especially nice and friendly," says Campbell. "The food and beverage manager was easy to work with. When the conference was over, the AV guy even helped me pack up my extra brochures and notepads that were all over the meeting space."

Attendees were encouraged to enjoy the variety of off-property activities. "We liked the idea of going during baseball spring training season to attract the baseball fans," says Campbell. "Many of us really enjoyed heading over to Sanibel Island, since it's just over the causeway from the Marriott. If you want night life, there was music every night at the hotel's bar. There are other great hotels in the area, and there's always Fort Myers Beach for more activity."

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The Coca-Cola Orlando Eye is one of the newest attractions in Orlando and the largest observation wheel on the East Coast.



service is the best I have encountered. The value we received was excellent".

According to the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, Miami is a constantly evolving global destination, providing meeting planners with exceptional options for meetings, conventions and events.

As William D. Talbert III, CDME, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, explains, "The unparalleled culture, accessibility, hotel rooms and diverse offsite venues set against a backdrop of beautiful weather and beaches are just a few of the elements that make Miami the preeminent locale for meetings and events."

"Meetings and conventions held in Greater Miami have seen record international attendance due to the ease of air access to the destination," Talbert says. "With three convention centers totaling more than 1 million sq. ft. 75 additional meeting venues throughout the destination and more than 50,000 hotel rooms from intimate boutique hotels to luxury resorts and convention hotels, the GMCVB convention sales team is eager to be the meeting planner's onsite, one stop for assistance with every detail from start to finish." Talbert says. "Our experienced, knowledgeable team welcomes the opportunity to work with planners to identify hotels, venues, vendors and more to fulfill and exceed expectations for a highly successful meeting in Miami!"

Notably, the Miami Beach Convention Center is undergoing a \$615 million renovation and expansion, which will result in a new facility perfectly designed to host large-scale business, trade, civic and cultural events. The renovation will include a mixed-use, 60,000-sq-ft grand ballroom, 500,000 sq-ft of exhibit space, 81 new breakout rooms spanning 190,000 sq-ft, a 20,000-sq-ft glass rooftop junior ballroom, advanced technology and new versatile indoor/outdoor public spaces.

"The renovation and expansion of the Miami Beach Convention Center adds to the attraction of the destination for meeting and convention planners by offering a totally transformed state-of-the-art, technologically advanced facility with enhanced amenities, service and an extraordinary sense of place that reflects the stunning local environment, culture and community," Talbert says. "In addition, hotels such as the Loews Miami Beach, The Sheraton Miami Airport Hotel & Executive Meeting Center and The Betsy South Beach are just some of the properties that continue to cater to the meetings industry, completing multi-million-dollar renovations to their event spaces."

Here's a roundup of what's new and noteworthy throughout the Sunshine State.

**Central Florida**

Margaritaville Resort Orlando, a waterfront destination, is set to open late this year with 187 guest rooms, 1,000 Margaritaville-themed vacation homes and 300 timeshare units. The resort also will feature a new entertainment and dining district and 12-acre waterpark.

The 1,000-room Loews Sapphire Falls Resort at Universal

vibe, wildlife tours, theme park days and high-end restaurants," he says. "It truly depends on the direction your guests would most enjoy."

**Chic City Vibe**

Groups seeking properties with a chic, bustling city vibe can find them in the Miami area. Kathy Miller, events manager at Kaseya, a New York City-based information technology management software provider, recently held a meeting at the 157-room Hotel Colonnade, located on the famed Miracle Mile in Coral Gables.

The group enjoyed the results of the Hotel Colonnade's recently completed \$18 million renovation, which included guest rooms and event venues as well as a new lobby bar.

"We had an annual sales kickoff meeting for 175 people for five days, all onsite," says Miller. "There were all-day meetings with food and beverages, an award ceremony and onsite dinners. This is a beautiful hotel with lots of meeting space located right downtown with easy access to the airport and Miami. Many restaurants were all within walking distance. The staff and



A creative sand sculpture sporting fun sea creatures delighted attendees in Orlando.

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