



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

[Home](#)

[Career Resources](#)

[Education & Events](#)

[Membership & Chapters](#)

[Publications & Research](#)

[Directory & Buyer's Guide](#)

[Marketing/Advertising Opportunities](#)

[MPI Foundation](#)

[Inside MPI](#)

[MPI Store](#)

Search MPIWeb

[Help](#)

the meeting PROFESSIONAL

October 2006 • Volume 26 • Number 10 • *The Meeting Professional*

Feature

Like No Other

Convention centers and standard hotels are not always what the doctor ordered. The prescription often calls for event venues that are truly unique, and maybe even strange.

By Maria Lenhart

These days there is little excuse for choosing a lackluster meeting or event location. With an ever-growing array of sites—everything from movie theaters and stadiums to battleships—positioned to attract group business, the choices are practically unlimited.

“More and more places are targeting meetings now and we’re just scratching the surface,” said Chuck Salem, CMP, a member of the MPI Pittsburgh Chapter and president of Unique Venues, a company that provides venue location services. “Thousands more unique venues will become available in the years ahead.”

While meetings are not necessarily the core function of many of these locations, they do play an important auxiliary role.

“More places have come to recognize that events are revenue generators that will help them support the building,” Salem noted.

Salem, who will present a seminar in January on using unique venues at MPI’s Professional Education Conference-North America in New Orleans, added that the proliferation of venue choices is coming at a time when there is more impetus for planners to include at least one non-traditional venue during a meeting.

“People have come to expect something different during the program. If it’s not there, they notice it,” he said.

Follow Your Nose

Among the many places that are actively courting group business are restaurants, an increasing number of which are offering not only private dining rooms but other types of event spaces as well.

“We’re seeing a trend for restaurants to also operate large function areas that can hold hundreds of attendees,” Salem said.

An example is One Market, a restaurant in downtown San Francisco that emphasizes seasonal menus using fresh local ingredients. Along with two private dining rooms seating 40 each, the restaurant offers the adjacent Cesar Pelli Pavilion, a glass-roofed function area that can accommodate up to 1,000 people for a reception.

Maggiano’s Little Italy, which has restaurants across the U.S., is among the many chains actively courting group business. Among the most extensive is Grand-Maggiano’s in downtown Chicago, which features 10 banquet rooms with seating for up to 300 and an outdoor Florentine-style patio that is a popular spot for events.

Meeting on the Mound

Sports stadiums reign supreme among facilities that are turning to special events as a way to defray the costs of construction and operation. New stadiums such as Heinz Field, home of the National Football League’s Pittsburgh Steelers, and PETCO Park, home of Major League Baseball’s (MLB) San Diego Padres, are two prominent examples of sports facilities that have been built to include venues suitable for a wide variety of group events. The new stadiums and ballparks are being used for everything from elegant dinners featuring visits from retired ballplayers to galas held on the field.

“Sports stadiums are incredibly popular for events right now, and the stadiums are really picking up on this,” said Sabina Friedman, vice president of client services and strategy for Eventective.com, a venue location search engine.

Friedman notes that it is not only new stadiums that offer function space, but that older ballparks—such as Boston’s Fenway Park—are also getting into the act. Last year the legendary home of MLB’s Boston Red Sox added several new function areas, including the Crown Royal Club designed for gatherings of up to 150 and an outdoor rooftop seating/reception area for lunches or receptions.

At Ease

Military-related venues are also proliferating as event options.

Decommissioned bases such as the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station near Boston provide huge amounts of open space for events. According to Facilities Manager Rick Packard, the former Naval Air Station—with its 45 acres, ample parking and private security service—has become a popular venue for automotive product launches by clients such as General Motors and BMW.

Some active military bases are also providing unique settings for events. In San Diego, two Marine bases—Camp Pendleton and Marine Corps Air Station Miramar—are exciting backdrops for events that range from exclusive officer's club dinners with fighter pilots to hangar receptions with aircraft taking off in the background. At Camp Pendleton, San Diego-based PRA Destination Management has arranged beach parties complete with amphibious vehicles coming out of the water and onto shore.

"These events are real show-stoppers," said Tracey Brenneman, CMP, senior sales manager for PRA in San Diego and a member of the MPI San Diego Chapter. "The bases are also effective because there is a degree of exclusivity—not just anyone has access to them. It really gives the group bragging rights."

According to Brenneman, groups are equally impressed with events held aboard the *USS Midway*, a former aircraft carrier that now serves as a Naval air museum in San Diego.

"It's incredibly versatile—you use the flight deck for 4,000 people or the hangar base for small groups," she said.

The *USS Midway* is just one of several former war ships frequently used for events. Others include the *USS Missouri* anchored in Honolulu's Pearl Harbor and the *USS Hornet* anchored near San Francisco in Alameda, Calif. An entire array of historic military vessels accommodating groups is available at Battleship Cove in Fall River, Mass.

West Virginia's Greenbrier Resort is the unlikely setting for another unusual venue with a militaristic twist. The Bunker, a top-secret facility built deep into a hillside on resort grounds, was constructed during former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration to house members of the U.S. Congress in the event of a nuclear attack. The Greenbrier recently added five new conference rooms to the Bunker, which also includes such features as a 25-ton blast door, decontamination chambers, dormitories, a clinic, a laboratory and a power plant.

Back to School

Although still a good choice for groups on a budget, meeting facilities at colleges and universities have evolved dramatically in recent years.

"Colleges today offer facilities that are much more upscale than 25 years ago," Salem said. "We're seeing student unions with beautiful conference space, dining halls with wood-fired pizza ovens and even hotels with conference centers right on campus."

The array of unique venues provided on college campuses can be surprising. At the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, groups can enjoy a salmon barbeque on the grounds of the Museum of Anthropology; meet at the First Nations Longhouse, a dramatic multi-purpose hall with roof beams carved by Northwest Coast artists; or attend a reception in the Cecil Green Park House, a historic mansion overlooking the sea.

Sophisticated conference facilities can also be found on campuses. Among them is the University of Minnesota's Continuing Education and Conference Center in St. Paul, which recently completed a renovation that included the addition of updated features providing for webcasting, interactive TV and other high-tech delivery options.

The Silver Screen

Thanks to an abundance of movie theater complexes built in the 1990s, a huge number of multiplexes are now being marketed to groups.

“A lot of theater complexes have found that, especially during the day, they simply can’t fill their 24 screening areas,” Salem said. “So they are being utilized for conferences and they can be surprisingly versatile. They offer things like stadium seating and satellite broadcast technology that can link several locations. You can arrange for attendees to get candy and popcorn from the concession area and have a feature film shown at the end of the meeting.”

A major source for theaters is CineMeetings & Events, a division of National CineMedia based in Centennial, Colo., which offers access to more than 1,000 U.S. theater complexes. CineMeetings has arranged product launches, training meetings, team-building events and award ceremonies for corporate clients that include Microsoft and Bayer HealthCare.

Back at the Hotel

Although hotels are typically considered traditional venues, there are some that definitely fall into the unique category. Located in Québec City, the Ice Hotel is built from 20,000 tons of snow and ice and features 34 guest rooms, art galleries, a chapel and 10 meeting areas that accommodate up to 600.

Open from early January through March, the Ice Hotel offers a full range of winter activities such as dog sledding and snow shoeing and also arranges special events such as receptions, product launches and team-building exercises.

Another unique hotel choice is Malmaison Oxford Castle, an elegant, 94-room hotel that opened last year in a former prison in Oxford, England. Many of the rooms are converted prison cells, with two or more cells combined to create a larger space. Despite its past, Malmaison Oxford Castle features luxury furnishings and appointments and is marketed as a site for incentive programs and small conferences.

MARIA LENHART is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.

SIDEBAR #1

Home Planning

Frustrated by what she felt was a lack of venues with a “wow” factor, San Francisco-based event planner Nancy Frumkes decided to do something about it. Teaming up in 2005 with Cindi Osborn, a former film industry location scout, Frumkes co-founded Mint Locations, a company that provides sumptuous privately owned homes and estates for offsite events.

“When doing corporate events, I noticed there were not a lot of locations that go beyond the traditional,” said Frumkes, who has arranged events for companies such as Pixar and Gap Inc. “At the same time, I knew that meeting planners were always looking for unusual places, that they’re under constant pressure to come up with something new and different.”

While Osborn focuses on finding home locations, Frumkes works with meeting planners in setting up the events. For the past year the women have been establishing a portfolio of available homes in Northern California but plan to expand to other

locations in North America and Europe during the coming months.

"Within a year we will be international," Frumkes said.

Mint Location properties currently include such venues as House Above the Clouds, a stunning modern home on a hilltop high above Napa Valley vineyards featured in *Architectural Digest*. Beachfront houses, urban lofts, Victorian mansions, wine country estates and even an elegantly outfitted barn are among the company's current offerings. The venues can accommodate everything from intimate dinners to very large gala receptions.

When adding homes to the Mint Locations collection, Frumkes says they all have to meet extraordinary criteria.

"It takes much more than a stellar view, a couple of original Eames chairs and a driveway big enough for a generator truck to make the cut," she said.

Such standards are crucial if private homes are to work as upscale venues, according to Tracy Brenneman, CMP, senior sales manager for PRA Destination Management in San Diego.

"If you have a high-end incentive group where the people are making millions of dollars, you have to make sure you're not taking them to a house that may be no more impressive than their own homes or those of their neighbors," she said.

SIDEBAR #2

Unique-Venue-Specific Search Engines

Planners looking for one-of-a kind meeting sites have a lot of help these days in the form of search engines dedicated to unique venues. Many of these online services enable users to submit electronic RFPs. Most of these services are also free to users because the revenue is derived from online advertising and fees paid by facilities for prominent display. Here is a sampling of what is available.

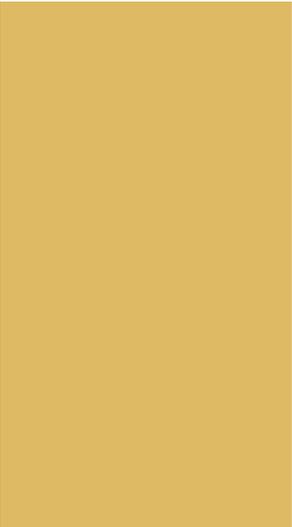
www.uniquevenues.com

Unique Venues provides information on distinctive meeting sites, including those at colleges and universities, in North America and the United Kingdom. The company, which has provided venue-finding services for 20 years and introduced its Web site in 1996, also publishes a print directory.

www.eventective.com

Eventective provides detailed information and photos of more than 56,000 meeting facilities in North America, including many non-hotel venues such as ships, mansions, museums and restaurants.

www.alltimefavorites.com



Along with a general directory of event resources such as caterers and bus charters, All Time Favorites offers information on venue locations across the U.S.

www.conventionplanit.com

This Web portal offers online search capabilities for special event venues, along with destinations, hotels and meeting services providers. The site also offers links to meetings industry organizations, news updates, calendar listings and more.

www.venuedirectory.com

Based in the United Kingdom, Venuedirectory.com emphasizes venue locations in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. In the coming months the company plans to include venue locations in Canada, the Caribbean, the Middle East, South America and Europe.

[Join MPI](#) | [Advertise](#) | [MPI Resource Center](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Disclaimer](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQs](#)

© 2006; Meeting Professionals International
Dallas, TX.

All rights reserved

