

prevue
March-April 2009

PEACEFUL EASY MEETINGS



SAN DIEGO AND PALM SPRINGS GET THEIR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA GROOVE ON

Sergio Ortiz

“IF YOU WANT TO
HAVE A MARTINI
DURING OR AFTER
YOUR MASSAGE, WE’LL
BRING YOU ONE”

So, just what is a colita anyway? Ever wonder? In the Eagles’ *Hotel California*, the “warm smell of colitas/rising up through the air” phrase makes you think of an exotic, fragrant wildflower in the desert on a balmy breezeless night.

Well, it is a fragrant flower, but only legal in that state for medicinal purposes. However, the iconic song does represent the laid-back, peaceful easy feeling we associate with San Diego and Palm Springs – the yin and yang of chillin’ out.

L’IL BIG HARBOR

Near La Jolla, dun-colored cliffs topped with multimillion dollar mansions seem to drop into the Pacific at land’s end. From this vantage point, San Diego resembles a well-designed miniature train layout skirting the sea. For meeting planners, few big cities are so manageable, with so many built-in activities in a small area. The bulk of downtown meeting hotels, San Diego Convention Center, Gaslamp Quarter and Embarcadero waterfront district are all within walking distance along San Diego’s inimitable bayfront.

Meanwhile, historic Balboa Park with 1,200 acres of landscaped parks and museums, and the world-famous San Diego Zoo, are just minutes north of downtown.

“What’s so attractive about San Diego is how its outside orientation enriches any meeting,” says David Peckinpaugh, president and CEO of **San Diego CVB**. “Everything is minutes away, and the sun-soaked surf setting along with the city’s easy-going vibe actually inspires learning and innovation.”



The average temperature is another big carrot.

“We have more venues for outdoor activities due to our weather than anywhere in the West,” says Chris Lee, CEO of **Access Destination Services DMC**, “without the traffic or smog, too. And that’s become super important. Planners these days are requesting more and more active outdoor recreational excursions. They ask us: What do you guys do on the weekends?”

Lee says ocean kayaking is a major draw, along with group biking and hiking along the oceanview hills in Torrey Pines. Sailing regattas are big sellers too, especially aboard sleek America’s Cup racing yachts where participants man the winches and haul in sails themselves. Speaking of boats, the region’s large naval community can help planners theme events, with some flourishes.

Imagine a sit down lunch on the flight deck of the *USS Midway* aircraft carrier when Navy SEALs parachute down out of the sky carrying award plaques for your top performers. Or a seemingly simple picnic on the beach. Everyone in the group is enjoying the sun on their face, until SEALs in scuba gear emerge from the sea in a mock beach assault to abscond with your CEO in an inflatable raft.

“We also go to **Miramar** for events at Top Gun in the officer’s club,” says Lee. “We’ll have a BBQ party and poker tournament where the group mingles with retired Navy pilots. It’s pretty cool. People love to hear those guys’ adventures.”

You’ll want a connected DMC for that. Just try calling an active US military base and say you want to come by with your people for a visit. We did. Won’t happen again.

Next door at the **Flying Leatherneck Aviation Museum**, groups can wander among dozens of restored military planes ranging from an early WWII Grumman Wildcat to a late model F18. Request a guided tour behind the scenes to see restorations in progress, like those on a MIG 15 and Iraqi helicopter seized in Desert Storm, led by former pilots.

BEYOND THE FISH TACO

The *USS Midway* is located at the Embarcadero, a 2-mile stretch of waterfront parks anchored by the Maritime Museum, with large group dining venues at Seaport Village and The Fish Market. Maybe order some Mazatlan prawns and have them delivered to your group under the palm trees at Tuna Harbor Park.

Nearby, the Gaslamp Quarter is home to more than 150 chic restaurants and bars. We recommend the Quarter Kitchen’s exquisite caviar tacos with horseradish. Follow them with a Code-7: chocolate-glazed jelly doughnuts.

You can still get the ubiquitous fish taco around here, of course. But San Diego has become the unofficial capital of Nuevo Latino cuisine, a blend of Mexican, Caribbean and South American dishes. The uncontested star of this revolutionary cuisine is Zocalo, where entrees marry local meats and seafood with yucca, boniato, plantains and chilies.

With so many dining and recreational options in one place, Andrea Wills of the **Conference Board**, a New York-based business research firm, doesn’t have to plan every minute of her meetings. “Our members love San Diego because we can let the attendees plan their own activities around the great attractions found along the seaboard,” she says.

HOTEL SAN DIEGO

Likewise with the hotels. Many are destinations themselves, such as **Hotel del Coronado**, **Loews Coronado Bay Resort** and **The Catamaran** across the harbor in Coronado Island – lush oases that could double as retreats in some faraway South Seas locale. There are hidden gardens where more than a



thousand flowering plant varieties bloom. Exotic birds sing and chirp from branches everywhere while palm trees cast long shadows over more than 30 different species of hibiscus. Plus, the west coast is bathed with striking sunsets at the end of the day, with secluded sandy beaches stretching along crescent coves.

“To us San Diego is the most attractive place on the west coast to hold our event,” says Laurel Humbert, a planner for the **Association for Behavioral Sciences & Medical Education**, who booked The Catamaran. “The meeting venue is as important as the destination, and we loved that most of its meeting halls had panoramic views of the harbor.”

In downtown’s financial district, the 184-room **Sé San Diego** opened this year, after originally being developed under the Setai brand. The Zen-inspired boutique is dark and sleekly sassy with Brazilian walnut floors, Nepali carpets and Jerusalem bone limestone finishes. The 7,000-sf pool deck with the adjacent VIP Pool Lounge is this season’s most sophisticated buyout.

A surprising 20,000 sf of space includes a private screening room for up to 34 guests, accompanied by a recording studio open for private functions. The Grand Sé Ballroom, with 2-story windows, utilizes hydraulics in the ceiling to hide the projector, and planners get their own meeting concierge and set designer. Group rates start at \$179, with suite upgrades included. We like the 20 voluminous Luxe Suites with full designer kitchens and oceanview balconies.

Also new this year, the waterfront **Hilton San Diego Bayfront** opened adjacent to the convention center. The 1,190 rooms feature panoramic views of the Pacific and harborfront through oversize windows that make up the ½ million-sf glass façade. Meeting space is impressive at 165,000 sf.

RETRO REVISITED

About 125 miles northeast of San Diego, on the edge of the Mojave Desert, the little zip code known as Palm Springs is the epitome of modern desert living. The destination, with a population of 350,000 people and 109 golf courses, lies at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains. It’s composed of eight cities: Palm Springs, Desert Hot Springs, Indian Wells, Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City, La Quinta and Indio.

The region’s city fathers, including ex-mayor Sonny Bono, have always fought to retain the area’s village atmosphere. Plentiful walkways are lined with lampposts and Mexican tilework leading to independent shops, galleries, fine-dining restaurants and coffeehouses glittering in the desert sun.

**“PLANNERS LOVE THAT ACCESS.
IT’S THE ALLURE OF WHAT’S BEHIND THE GATE.”**

“The city remains an affordable destination because of its down-to-earth accessibility,” says Hillary Angel, spokesperson for **Palm Springs Bureau of Tourism**. “Attendees can walk from their hotels to the convention center, sparing the cost and burden of booking shuttles.”

Jim Dunn, executive director of the **Palm Springs Convention Center**, adds, “Groups that meet here are often surprised at the bond they develop with the city. One national group we had literally took over the city and were recognized everywhere in restaurants and shops downtown.”

Despite its remoteness for years, and also because of it, Palm Springs was the hideaway for celebrities fleeing the glare of Hollywood klieg lights. For Bob Hope, Elvis and Sinatra, the Coachella Valley exuded an air of subtle luxury and discreet hotels, where social power was dressed down.

For offsite events, the coterie of homes previously owned by celebrities are fab venues. The manses of Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Barbara



Hutton/Cary Grant, among others, can host up to 400 attendees. Celebrity stand-ins can welcome guests and ruminate on 1950s Palm Springs society.

“There is such respect for celebrities in Palm Springs since we have such a tight sense of community, and the city has always been a safe haven,” says Barb Smith, partner of **Access Destination Services DMC**. “We use our access to get groups into private country clubs like Bighorn, and they’ll see Goldie Hawn or Mary Hartman but it’s always low key. Planners love that access. It’s the allure of what’s behind the gate.”

Smith says another popular group activity is golf cart polo. Groups will book the polo grounds to watch private polo matches, and then grab carts to play themselves. Jeep tours through the canyons and waterfalls are highly requested, but surprisingly so are guided jaunts out to the Windmill Farm.

“That’s our Statue of Liberty; everyone really wants to learn about energy efficiency these days,” enthuses Smith.

Palm Springs is more with the times regarding its hotel product too. Within the last decade, the area’s mid-century Modernism architecture burst into vogue, a younger generation sashayed in, and the classic gin martini gave way to pomegranate daiquiris.

THE RIV

Here’s a taste. The very definition of retro swank, **The Riviera Resort & Spa** reopened in October after undergoing a 2-year, \$70 million renovation. Originally unveiled in 1959, the resort was designed like Vegas futurist landmarks of the time, such as The Sands and Stardust. It was the staple hang out for the Rat Pack who held court around the city’s signature pool, while Elvis recovered in the Mediterranean Room between gigs in Vegas.

The “Riv” is back with a new, 12,000 sf SpaTerre wellness facility and 45,000 sf of meeting space, which includes an oyster shaped ballroom with nine original crystal chandeliers. Groups can also buy out the Bikini Bar by the pool, with an outdoor lounge designed for sipping aged rum drinks while watching the sun set behind the San Jacinto Mountains.

HAPPY CHIC

Turning the idea that luxury needs to be somber on its head, the 144-room **Parker Palm Springs** proves eclecticism can be as high-end as elegance. Everywhere you look, there’s mod 1970s accessories and kitschy furnishings like the tangerine entryway with a sword-wielding set of armor guarding the door.

Jonathan Adler was the renovation honcho who re-imagined the ex-residence of both Merv Griffin and Gene Autry. The celeb “happy chic” designer is well known for his quirky take on home design, and his quirky self. His mantras include: ‘Tassles are the earrings of a home,’ ‘Minimalism is a bummer,’ and ‘Your home should make you happy.’

Thomas Meding, general manager, elaborates: “What we tried to do is really look back at luxury in a different light. We looked at it from the perspective of a private estate – a place where you can come with friends and make new friends.”



How so?

“It’s very, very unhotel like. For example, usually in hotels, the bath amenities all come from the same producer. At home, you have different kinds of hair conditioners, shampoo, soap, body wash and so forth. We do the same principle here. We took what we think is the best of each whether it’s Hermes soap or L’Occitane, and then we’d use Morton Brown for the body wash because we think it’s the best.”

Meding says luxury should be, “comfortable and all about the good life – just really having fun with it.” In that spirit, we’re going to let Meding keep talking.

Thomas, tell us about the restaurants.

“We have Mr. Parker’s, which is our dinner restaurant, which is kind of sexy, dark and seductive where guests get fantastic bistro food, yet it reminds you of being taken back to Studio 54 with the ambience and the music. Then you have Norma’s, and when you really boil it down, it’s a 5-star diner, that’s really what it is. It serves absolutely fantastic comfort food, where you can really indulge.”

And the 16,000-sf Palm Springs Yacht Club spa?

“You know what, if you want to have a martini during your massage or after, we’ll bring you one. This is all about the good life – there’s no incense burning here, no water dripping on a stone, no hand holding and singing *Kumbaya*.”

With 11,000 sf of meeting space, how’s group biz?

“We try to get involved from the very first steps in the planning process, and now we’ve groomed a lot of repeat groups that are coming to us year over year...The reason why we’ve been able to do groups so successfully is because all of our function rooms have natural light and they all have adjacent outdoor spaces, as well. Here in Palm Springs, it’s all about the climate and what we try to do is bring the outside in and vice versa.”

Can you tell us about some of your groups?

“We’ve done events for Samsung. We did a car launch for Mercedes Benz, we’ve done the CLIA awards, we’ve had AT&T, we’ve had just about every car manufacturer you can think of, and we also have close ties to the association market, especially here in Southern California.”

Thomas, we’ll take that martini now. Thank you...

San Diego CVB, sandiego.org
Palm Springs Bureau of Tourism, palm-springs.org
Palm Springs Desert CVA, giveintothedesert.com
Access Destination Services, accessdmc.com
Flying Leatherneck Museum, flyingleathernecks.org
Hotel del Coronado, hoteldel.com
Loews Coronado Bay Resort, loewshotels.com
The Catamaran, catamaranresort.com
Se San Diego, sesandiego.com
Hilton S. Diego Bayfront, hiltonsandiegobayfront.com
Palm Springs Convention Center, palm Springs scc.com
Riviera Resort & Spa, psriviera.com
Parker Palm Springs, theparkerpalmsprings.com

Since 1970, **ACCESS** Destination Services has provided the highest caliber of full-service, professional destination management and event production services in the West, including the Anaheim/Orange County, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Palm Springs and San Diego areas.