

Atlantic City: Meetings and Family Friendly — It's Not Just a Gaming Town Anymore

By Derek Reveron – February 1, 2018



The concert venue at Harrah's Resort Atlantic City seats 1,200 for special events. Credit: Meet AC

There are more reasons than ever to meet in Atlantic City. The destination has shed its decades-old reputation as only a gaming capital by expanding and renovating properties and meeting spaces while offering more activities, entertainment and dining options.

As a result, Atlantic City is attracting more families and meetings, including many groups from outside its traditional East Coast base of businesses and associations. Groups have a choice of gaming and non-gaming properties offering a total of about 7,000 guest rooms, 260 meeting rooms and 1 million sf of meeting space.

Non-gaming hotels include Sheraton Atlantic City, Showboat Atlantic City, The Claridge Hotel (now a Radisson property), Courtyard by Marriott and Stockton Seaview Resort. Gaming hotels include Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, Caesars Atlantic City, Bally's Atlantic City, Borgata Hotel

Casino & Spa, The Water Club (Borgata), Resorts Casino Hotel, Golden Nugget Atlantic City, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino and Tropicana Hotel & Casino.

Many Atlantic City properties are undergoing improvements. The iconic Tropicana, for example, completed \$40 million in renovations including 500 Havana Tower Hotel and the North Tower. Tropicana offers 122,000 sf of meeting space including an 18,000-sf column-free ballroom that accommodates up to 1,800 attendees as well as 50 function rooms and the Grand Exposition Center, which accommodates groups of up to 2,000 people.

The Tropicana Experience

In September, Five Below, a Philadelphia-based discount store chain, held its annual meeting for 900 store managers, district managers, regional directors and other employees at the Tropicana. “In the past, we have had smaller meetings at the Tropicana,” says Dennis Lattman, director, field human resources, Five Below. “We were excited to return with the entire Five Below team.”

Tropicana was a good fit for Five Below for several reasons, including the meeting space. “Meeting accommodations were perfect,” says Lattman. “We occupied almost 500 rooms and everyone was close to the meeting space and theater. Both were in close proximity so it was convenient and allowed us to network and communicate information to attendees in an easy manner.”

Location also was a big plus. “Being on the Boardwalk with the beach within walking distance was great for everyone,” says Lattman. “Tropicana also has many convenient restaurants, shopping and entertainment activities to choose from within the hotel.”

Five Below attendees enjoyed almost everything the Tropicana offers. “They utilized Tropicana gift cards that Five Below provided to them,” says Lattman. “We had our district manager happy hour at Jose Garces’ Olón restaurant, which provided great views of the beach and authentic food and cocktails. The entire group enjoyed meals at Tropicana’s other restaurants.”

Lattman plans to continue meeting at the Tropicana, partly because of its stellar service. “There are so many examples of this that it’s hard to limit it to a few instances,” says Lattman. “The food and catering department responded quickly to menu changes and event needs. The head of hotel sales ensured that everything was handled with pleasure, gratitude and smiles.”

Resorts Casino Shines

Another property that offers top service is Mohegan Sun’s 942-room Resorts Casino Hotel. The resort is re-establishing its reputation as a top East Coast beachfront property with a \$100 million expansion and renovation, which included a recent facelift of all 480 rooms in its Ocean Tower (including 112 junior suites, 14 parlor suites and one presidential suite).

Other upgrades that are part of the renovation investment include \$35 million spent on the Jimmy Buffett-themed Margaritaville entertainment complex, which features Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurant and LandShark Bar & Grill. The new high-tech conference center, which was added in 2015, has 64,000 sf of meeting space, 24 meeting rooms, four ballrooms, a showroom and two theaters seating 300 and 1,350 people, respectively.

Wawa, a Media, Pennsylvania-based convenience store chain, held its first meeting at Resorts Casino Hotel in November after having met at other Atlantic City hotels over the years. About 1,000 Wawa sales employees attended.

Raechelle Jackson, Wawa's meeting planner and public relations representative, was impressed by Resorts' meeting space. "It was perfect for what we needed and within our budget," says Jackson. "The hotel has plenty of space for different planning options. The open space, the ability to divide the space into smaller rooms, the larger conference space for receptions and the theater were perfect. We had three workshops that the space accommodated well. The flow of getting in and out of each room was good."

Top-shelf Service

Jackson says that Resorts Casino is now her first choice for all of Wawa's Atlantic City event space needs, and one reason is the property's service, which, she says exceeded expectations. "The flexibility and the paying attention to detail were excellent," says Jackson. "Everything was set and ready on time. The team was always available to make any changes or accommodate us. We booked the space a few weeks before the meeting date and we were able to meet with the property, plan and execute the event as if we did it for months."

Groups looking for a Las Vegas-style experience can look to the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa, which is a favorite of large and small groups.

John Boyd Jr., principal of the Princeton, New Jersey-based Boyd Company, a management consulting firm, has planned dozens of mostly two-day meetings in Atlantic City over the last five years involving groups of five to 15 client executives.

Boyd says his clients prefer the Borgata among Atlantic City properties. "When you talk to executives who have spent time in Las Vegas, they say Borgata is the most comparable property in terms of service and accommodations," says Boyd. "Folks at the Borgata know who we are, and we have a good relationship with them."

Boyd's attendees typically arrive on a Thursday, have a group dinner that night, do business on Friday and then take in some entertainment. Many stay for the weekend.

Boyd uses mostly small, elegant spaces in the Borgata. "We need privacy for the sensitive nature of our work — advising companies on location decisions and cutting costs," says Boyd. "Most of our meetings are held in private suites unless we are hosting an entire team of executives. Then

we will use a conference room, and arrange for different activities, dinners and entertainment, including pursuits for wives.”

The Borgata’s gaming, entertainment and dining options remain a big draw for Boyd’s attendees. Boyd regularly holds dinners at the property’s Old Homestead and Bobby Flay Steak restaurants.

Off-property, dining and entertainment options are plentiful. “My favorite place to bring clients for dinner is Angeloni’s II Restaurant & Lounge because it offers a good private dining experience, has a real Atlantic City experience and an extensive wine list,” says Boyd. “Off-property entertainment has included Jerry Seinfeld, Don Rickles, Jay Leno and a country music festival.”

More Meeting Space

The Borgata is among the properties that have added meeting space with the opening of its new 18,000-sf Central Conference Center (CCC), increasing the resort’s total meeting and event space to 106,000 sf spread over three venues — The Event Center, The Water Club and the new CCC, which includes five flexible meeting rooms and a 6,500-sf ballroom. Borgata’s sister property, the 800 room Water Club at Borgata, features 36,000 sf of meeting space.

Harrah’s new 100,000-sf Waterfront Conference Center is the largest such facility between Baltimore and Boston. The modern facility boasts two 50,000-sf ballrooms, 64,000 sf of meeting space and LEED Silver Certification.

The 483-room Claridge Hotel, a Radisson Hotel, added 15,000 sf of conference space bringing the property’s total to 100,000 sf, including a 6,400-sf room and four smaller spaces. The Claridge, home to the Holtzman Art Gallery, recently renovated its ballroom and opened Atlantic City’s first rooftop bar, VUE, which features panoramic views of Atlantic City.

Atlantic City’s prime meeting space is the Atlantic City Convention Center (ACCC), the largest convention center in New Jersey and one of the biggest on the East Coast. The facility offers more than 600,000 sf of total meeting, exhibit and function space for small and large meetings.

Improvements to the ACCC include a \$1 million Wi-Fi system upgrade offering attendees top-of-the-line connectivity. The ACCC also installed a new marquee atop the facility to welcome people to Atlantic City. In addition, plans call for improvements to Exhibit Hall A and improved LED lighting in the exhibit halls.

Groups seeking “green” meeting sites will appreciate the ACCC’s environmental practices, which include retrofitting, recycling and energy alternatives. The facility has reduced its energy consumption each year since it opened in 1997. Planners can learn more about the ACCC’s green practices by contacting Meet AC, the destination’s sales and marketing organization that supports the facility.

What's New

AC Ocean Walk has acquired the former Revel Casino Hotel and plans to open the property this summer as Ocean Resort Casino. Located along the Boardwalk, the 1,399-room Revel, first opened in April 2012 encompassing 6.4 million sf. Plans call for the Ocean Resort to retain its 165,000 sf of meeting and convention space, 138,000 sf of gaming space and 7,700-space parking facility.

Hard Rock International, new owners of the former Trump Taj Mahal, plans to open the renovated and refurbished property over Memorial Day weekend 2018. The renovation includes guest rooms and suites, new and upgraded dining options, meeting and convention spaces, performance venues and indoor pool. A Hard Rock Casino, Hard Rock Cafe, a full-service Rock Spa and state-of-the-art casino will also be included. Entertainment venues will include two 7,000-seat arenas.

Tropicana recently purchased the Chelsea hotel and plans to complete construction of its skyway bridge connecting the two properties. The hotels offer a total of 2,730 guest rooms.

Caesars Entertainment is investing \$200 million to upgrade its Atlantic City properties. Harrah's master plan includes its new Waterfront Conference Center, an upgrade to its 450-room Bayview Tower, new dining options and a renovation for the property's nightclub, The Pool After Dark. Bally's opened its new Wild Wild West bar to go along with its 1,760 guest rooms and 80,000 sf of meeting space.

Caesars Atlantic City Hotel & Casino offers 28,000 sf of meeting and event space, including its 17,135-sf Palladium Ballroom and 10 meeting rooms varying in size from 490 sf to 1,262 sf.

More Activities

New projects are aimed squarely at diversifying activities and attracting more families, including those who may visit with meeting attendees.

The Board of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA) recently approved a 2018 Capital Improvement Budget of about \$64 million for upgrades that include the Atlantic City Convention Center (ACCC) and Boardwalk Hall.

New projects also include the 200-foot observation wheel at Steel Pier, which opened in October 2017, featuring scenic views of the city's skyline and ocean from enclosed, climate-controlled gondolas.

Another attraction, the 350-foot-high vertical Polercoaster roller coaster is scheduled to open in 2019 on the site of the former Sands Casino. Other planned family-friendly attractions opening near the coaster include a zip line, skydiving simulator, extreme ninja course, and bar and retail space.

Meanwhile, Atlantic City also is expanding culinary experiences. Restaurants feature celebrity chefs such as Gordon Ramsay, Wolfgang Puck, Guy Fieri, Michael Symon, Jose Garces and Bobby Flay. Attendees also can shop till they drop at trendy outlets on properties such as Tropicana and Caesars as well as off-property outlets. Golfers can enjoy more than 25 golf courses in the Atlantic City area.

In addition, Atlantic City's gaming industry is growing and diversifying. By the end of November, total gaming revenue was \$2.45 billion, up 2.4 percent from 2017. Online gaming accounted for most of the growth. Gaming will diversify further if efforts underway to approve sports gaming in Atlantic City prove successful.

Atlantic City offers everything groups nationwide need for successful, memorable, small and large meetings. Most groups meeting in Atlantic City, especially repeat visitors, are based in the Northeast within a few hours' drive of the destination. However, more groups nationwide are discovering all that Atlantic City offers.

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