

Atlantic City: The New Frontier

Planners Searching For
New Meeting Spots May
Find Refuge in New Jersey



Credit: Ocean Resort Casino

By John Buchanan

At a time when many meeting planners are looking for something genuinely new and different to do, Atlantic City, one of the most historic and iconic beach destinations in the country, is undergoing a renaissance. And planners who discover it are often very pleasantly surprised by its scope and sophistication.

“We have world-class casino resorts in a true resort destination,” says Jim Wood, president and CEO of Meet AC, the city’s convention and visitors bureau. “We have beautiful, pristine beaches that a number of our major resorts sit on. We have the world-famous Atlantic City Boardwalk. We also offer a broad selection of nighttime entertainment. And we offer some of the best culinary experiences anyone could ever expect to have at a meeting.”

After a \$175 million renovation, the Ocean Resort Casino opened last June with 160,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space.



Credit: Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City

The arrival of the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino to Atlantic City brings in a younger crowd and world-class entertainment.

Jennie Tis, director of business development at local destination management company, Roberts Event Group, A Hosts Global Member, based in Philadelphia, adds that because of its evolution and transformation over the last few years,

“The thing that surprises some planners is the fact that we do have world-class casino resorts in a true resort setting that is truly spectacular.”

Jim Wood, President and CEO
Meet AC, Atlantic City, NJ



Atlantic City is now a formidable competitor in the national meetings market.

“It’s a fantastic meetings destination,” Tis says. “You really feel like you’re someplace that is special.”

It’s also unique and iconic, she says. The famous Atlantic City Boardwalk serves, in effect, as the trademark for a



One of the largest hotels in Atlantic City, Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa has more than 2,000 guest rooms and 18,000 square feet of meeting space.



Credit: Steve Frelton

nationally known tourism brand that has endured for a century. “So that gives us a sort of cool ‘retro’ appeal,” Tis says.

Meeting planners who have recently taken groups to Atlantic City also give it high marks.

“Meetings at Atlantic City resorts are now seen in a much more positive light,” says Mona S. Meretsky, CSEP, president of Fort Lauderdale-based COMCOR Event & Meeting Production and COMCOR Consulting Services. Meretsky, who has chosen the destination for several meetings, cites its infrastructure, especially its major casino resorts, as an important benefit.

“Many of the big resorts are self-contained,” she says. “And there’s so much to do that your attendees never have to leave if they don’t want to. In turn, that generates more interaction and networking. The major casinos have outstanding restaurants. The entertainment is very good. And there are great recreational opportunities available. You can also get great value in Atlantic City.”

John Boyd, principal of Princeton, New Jersey-based The Boyd Company, one of the country’s oldest and best-known site-selection firms, has brought more than 50 meetings and events to Atlantic City over the years.

“It’s actually a multi-faceted city, with so much to see and do,” Boyd says. “There’s a great hospitality infrastructure. It also offers excellent accessibility from airports in New York

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Credit: Harrah's Resort Atlantic City



Credit: Meet AC

Harrah's Resort Atlantic City features 125,000 square feet of meeting space, including The Harrah's Concert Venue (right), which seats 1,200 and offers a state-of-the-art theater environment for special events.

City and Philadelphia. And now there is growing airlift from other cities, too."

Beyond all of those attributes, Boyd says, there is an even more important benefit for him and his corporate clients. "Atlantic City is a place where people have fun," he says. "And, among the senior executives with whom we work, that helps foster networking and improved personal relationships."

Surprise, Surprise

Despite its long and illustrious history as a coveted East Coast vacation destination and a popular meetings destination for companies based in the northeast, Atlantic City surprises many meeting planners who visit for the first time.

"Until they actually come here, it's often lost on meeting planners that Atlantic City does sit right on the Atlantic Ocean and that we have beautiful beaches," Wood says. "The other thing that surprises some planners is the fact that we do have world-class casino resorts in a true resort setting that is truly spectacular.

"Another thing that surprises many planners is our size and capacity," he says. "We have four properties that offer more than 2,000 rooms each — Tropicana, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa and Harrah's Resort. And

all four of those resorts offer very, very good meeting space and meeting-related amenities, like a variety of fine-dining experiences, nightlife and entertainment. So when I say that comes as a surprise to planners who come for a site visit, it's also a very pleasant surprise."



Credit: Meet AC

A popular oceanfront restaurant is The LandShark Bar & Grill, located near the observation wheel on Atlantic City's Steel Pier.



Credit: Resorts Casino Hotel

Resorts Casino Hotel's Superstar Theater is a more than 17,000-square-foot event venue that hosts meetings as well as shows and concerts.

Tis agrees that planners are often amazed by the scope of the destination. "They're surprised by how big Atlantic City is, how many hotel properties there are and how many rooms we have." For the record, there are more than 17,500. "And there are a lot of options, including non-gaming hotels like The Claridge, for planners. That level of variety often comes as a real surprise to planners."

The biggest marvel, Wood and Tis say, is the extraordinary value that planners can take advantage of during the off-season.

"The most important thing about the destination when it comes to what meeting planners are looking for today," Tis says, "is that they're going to get luxury accommodations at a great value, as long as they don't come between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when every town on the Jersey Shore is full with vacationers. And if you plan a meeting here between Labor Day and Memorial Day, you're going to get beautiful

rooms with beautiful views of the ocean at a fraction of the price you'd pay during the summer."

In addition to exceptional value, Atlantic City offers pleasant weather in the spring and fall that avoids the sometimes extreme heat of summer.

New and Renovated Hotels

A key factor in Atlantic City's current renaissance has been the emergence of three hotels as pillars of its meeting infrastructure.

Last June, after an extensive \$175 million renovation, the former Revel property opened as the Ocean Resort Casino, a Hyatt-affiliated hotel. Ocean Resort Casino features 1,399 rooms and 160,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, which offers complimentary Wi-Fi. The resort's trio of signature fine-dining restaurants are Amada, a tapas-style Spanish eatery that specializes in the regional fare of Andalucía; American Cut, an award-winning steakhouse and modern Italian restaurant Dolce Mare.

Other amenities include the 40,000-square-foot Exhale Spa and a Topgolf Swing Suite that overlooks the Atlantic Ocean.

"The great news about having Ocean open up," Meet AC's Wood says, "has been their commitment to reinvest into the property in order to keep improving it. For example, they are going to develop and complete the 500 rooms that were supposed to be located right in the middle of the hotel, but were not actually built as Revel because they lacked the capital to do it. Ocean already has 1,399 rooms open, so once the new rooms are completed, they'll be up to 1,899." Projected opening of the new rooms in summer 2020.

The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City also made its debut last June, on the site of the former Trump Taj Mahal, after a \$500 million makeover.

Meeting attendees can't miss the 60-foot-tall guitar outside of the hotel that has 2,000 guest rooms offering amazing views of either Atlantic City or the Atlantic Ocean and more than 150,000 square feet of meeting and event space. The 29,000-square-foot Seminole Ballroom can be divided into as many as six sections in order to accommodate everything from intimate



"Almost everything that's hot right now about Atlantic City dining has to do with the celebrity chef scene."

Jennie Tis, Director of Business Development, Roberts Event Group, Philadelphia, PA

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Credit: Tropicana Atlantic City

Tropicana Atlantic City has more than 2,000 guest rooms and the 200,000-square-foot shopping and entertainment complex, The Quarter.

concerts to large banquets. The Hard Rock Live at Etes Arena can stage general sessions for up to 7,000 attendees or be used for major concerts or other entertainment.

And speaking of entertainment, it's what clearly defines the Hard Rock experience, making this resort casino property comparable to some Las Vegas hotels. With more than 20 nightlife and dining options onsite, as well as a casino featuring slots and table games, "the party never stops" at this newly opened resort. Attendees can have fun until the wee hours at venues such as DAER Nightclub, Sound Waves and Howie Mandel's Comedy Club. When it comes to fine-dining, the hotel's three flagship restaurants are Council Oak Fish, which specializes in ocean-to-table seafood and offers table-side caviar service; Kuro, a contemporary Japanese restaurant that features artisanal dishes crafted from ingredients sourced locally or imported from Japan; and Il Mulino, which serves classical "Old World" Italian cuisine, including home-made pastas and cheeses.

And there is, of course, a Hard Rock Cafe for more casual and fun dining. This 400-seat restaurant with the unique music memorabilia décor serves the savory fare guests know and love, plus some special dishes exclusive to this destination.

"There's so much to do that your attendees never have to leave if they don't want to. In turn, that generates more interaction and networking."

Mona S. Meretsky, CSEP, President, COMCOR Event & Meeting Production and COMCOR Consulting Services Fort Lauderdale, FL



If shopping is on the agenda, Hard Rock Hotel & Casino has that covered, too. A wide variety of shopping options are onsite, including a chic boutique, art gallery and Hard Rock gift shop. Attendees can get what they need without leaving the hotel.

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City boasts one of the largest music memorabilia collections in the United States featuring one-of-a-kind items from artists such as The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Madonna, KISS and Bruce Springsteen.

Highlights of the collection include the handwritten lyrics to "Imagine" by John Lennon, a black tuxedo from Dean Martin's personal wardrobe and Elvis' 1963 Rolls-Royce Phantom.

The arrival of the Hard Rock property marks an important milestone for Atlantic City. The appeal of the brand demographically will help bring to town younger, hipper groups, Wood says. "The curb appeal of the Hard Rock is definitely to a younger demographic. But what we're also seeing with the new hotel, which is very important to the brand and the destination, is a major commitment to world-class entertainment. And that means we will rival any destination anywhere, including Las Vegas, when it comes to big-name entertainment."

The third major pillar of the city's hotel infrastructure is the 2,590-room Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, located in the exclusive Marina District. It features 125,000 square feet of meeting space, including the \$125.8 million, state-of-the-art Waterfront Conference Center, now ranking as the largest meeting facility between Boston and Baltimore.

The three flagship fine-dining restaurants at Harrah's are the new Gordon Ramsay Steak; Martorano's, which serves classical Italian fare and what actor Al Pacino has called "the best meatballs on the planet" and Veracruz, which specializes in tapas and tacos.

Harrah's is now completing a \$56 million renovation of its 507-room Coastal Tower. The project is the latest phase of a \$125 renovation and expansion undertaken over the last four years, in addition to the development of the conference center.

Harrah's is vital to Atlantic City because of its long-standing, globally established parent brand, which represents the best of gaming, Wood says. "And on top of that, you have the incredible views in the Atlantic City property because of its location in the Marina District. The vistas are just gorgeous, and it's also very relaxing."

The Dining Scene

Yet another element of Atlantic City's evolution has been the growth and increased sophistication of its local dining options.

"Almost everything that's hot right now about Atlantic City dining has to do with the celebrity chef scene," Tis says. "For example, Stephen Starr has Buddakhan and The Continental. Buddakhan serves modern Asian cuisine, and The Continental features a global tapas menu and a fantastic ambience that includes a sunken fire pit lounge and an outdoor patio. Newer restaurants include Olón by Jose Garces, which opened at The Tropicana about two years ago. It features wonderful fresh seafood. And another great new restaurant is Gordon Ramsay Steak at Harrah's Resort. The Claridge, which is a non-gaming property, has a restaurant on its top floor called The VUE. It's a more casual place, but the view is breathtaking. It

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Credit: Meet AC

A fun activity for attendees is the Stockton Seaview Golf Club, which is a magnificent golf course for groups who want time to play golf.

also offers outdoor seating you can use at night for a spectacular experience.”

An oceanfront restaurant that Tis favors is The LandShark Bar & Grill, part of Jimmy Buffet’s dining and entertainment empire. “It’s located right on the beach,” Tis says. “So you get a sensational view, and it’s also a lot of fun.” Buyouts are available for groups of up to about 250 attendees.

Located just off the Boardwalk is the Orange Loop, which covers three beachfront blocks and features unique local restaurants and bars, as well as coffee shops and live music venues. Among its most popular establishments are Bourre,

“One venue we really like is the Noyes Arts Garage of Stockton University,” she says. “It’s truly something unique and different. It has arts exhibits that cycle through over the course of the year, and it shows Atlantic City in a way that most people don’t think of it because it doesn’t have anything to do with casino gaming. It has to do with culture and especially with pop art.

“Another venue we like very much is One Atlantic, located over the water on the boardwalk. It’s a private event venue that is also unique and different. It’s part of The Playground, which was formerly known as The Pier Shops. It has nice amenities like hardwood floors, as well as sweeping ocean views and beautiful space. And it can be customized to do smaller functions, like intimate cocktail parties, or lunches or dinners for as few as 50 people. Or you can go as high as 500 people for a seated dinner.”

Whenever Roberts Event Group submits a proposal, it also typically recommends activities that get attendees out on the water.

“So we recommend things like sunset boat cruises or deep-sea fishing charters,” Tis says. “We also can set up morning yoga classes on the beach, or at Ocean Resort we can do that in a ballroom overlooking the beach. We also now have a great local winery scene on the Jersey Shore. One we like is The Renault, which is about 15 minutes outside of town. Another fun activity is the Stockton Seaview Golf Club, which is a wonderful golf course for groups who want to work in some golf.”

Given everything that Atlantic City offers, Meet AC enthusiastically urges meeting planners who’ve never been to town to come for an exploratory site visit.

“We spend a lot of time bringing planners here,” Wood says. “We’re open to site inspections, by any planner, at any time. We’d love to show you around and show you what Atlantic City has to offer. And we’re confident that once you see it, you’ll want to come here for a meeting or conference.”

C&IT

“There’s a great hospitality infrastructure. ... Atlantic City is a place where people have fun.”

John Boyd, Principal
The Boyd Company, Princeton, NJ



which features Cajun barbecue, and the recently opened Tennessee Avenue Beer Hall.

“The locally owned restaurant scene in Atlantic City is eclectic,” Body says, “especially in ethnic neighborhoods like Ducktown, which has great little Italian restaurants.”

Among the city’s other best restaurants are three major-brand steakhouses — The Palm Atlantic City, Morton’s The Steakhouse and Ruth’s Chris Steak House — as well as local Italian favorites Carmine’s and Il Verdi. Two of the most beloved and highly rated seafood restaurants are Harry’s Oyster Bar & Seafood and Chart House.

Offsite Venues and Activities

Although its day-to-day meeting infrastructure is dominated by the major resort hotels, Atlantic City offers a pair of eclectic offsite venues that Tis often recommends to her clients.