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Uniquely D.C., Decidedly Virginia



By **Smart Meetings**

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Take it outside in The District and Mother of States

“All the world’s a stage,” said the Bard in *As You Like It*. In these times of contagion, fresh air and natural breezes are said to be safest—and that puts the stage outdoors. Happily so, in two of the East’s best places for plein air meetings.

Washington, D.C., has grandeur and it has grandstands, with dozens of outside options for gatherings large and small, fancy to funky. The Capitol District bills itself as “America’s front yard,” and attendees could spend weeks of between sessions taking in its monuments and memorials, 17 free Smithsonian museums and many intriguing neighborhoods.

Elliott Ferguson, president and CEO of Destination DC, says his city is ideally suited to host drive-to meetings and smaller, regional gatherings. “D.C. has a hundred free things to see and do, which will resonate with people who have budget issues,” he also notes.

Just across the Potomac, Virginia—which calls itself Mother of States—offers its own distinctive outdoor options, in an arresting blend of historic, maritime and contemporary, urban buzz and genteel countryside. Choose from Atlantic coast to mysterious mountains, with undulating hills and valleys in between.

District of Columbia



Maialino Mare at Thompson Washington DC

Rooftops are literally above it all, and they catch the freshest breezes. Those in the Capital District have the added advantage of jaw-dropping views of the city's grand architecture. Start with the newly renovated International Spy Museum in L'Enfant Plaza. Not only does this fascinating homage to espionage now have double the original exhibit space and many new areas for events, its sprawling rooftop terrace boasts some of the best views in the city for 100 or more well-spaced guests.

Another unique attraction with outdoor space to spare is Museum of the Bible, where the lush Biblical Gardens can host receptions or a dinner after normal museum hours. Flowers and greenery have Biblical references, and in the center of the garden stands the Tree of Life.

Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital is an eco-friendly, renovated Civil War-era building in southeast D.C. It was commissioned by Abraham Lincoln and its first patient, in 1866, was a 24-year-old African American seaman with gunshot wound. A landscaped garden can accommodate some 200 spaced for a reception and about half that number seated.

Situated on 11 lush acres that overlook Rock Creek Park, Omni Shoreham Hotel (834 guest rooms, 100,000 sq. ft. of meeting space) frequently hosts outdoor functions, including dinners and receptions in its two spacious outdoor terraces. Nearby, the park's biking/running routes and outdoor workout stations await.

Hotels across the district offer their own dramatic rooftops, with the added lure of high-end catering from their kitchens. Newly opened Thompson Washington DC in the historic Navy Yard (225 guest rooms and 7,000 sq. ft. of meeting space) has rooftop event space attended to by renowned restaurateur Danny Meyer's hospitality group; elsewhere on property, Maialino Mare, his Roman-style trattoria, offers private dining for groups.

One of the most anticipated new temptations in meetings hotels will offer a glass-enclosed outdoor patio restaurant and bar as well as a seasonal rooftop bar. This summer will see completion of the transformation of Kimpton Mason & Rook Hotel into Viceroy Washington DC, in Logan Circle, seven blocks from the convention center. The property will boast 178 guest rooms, and more than 5,000 sq. ft. of meeting space.

Another new property, The Conrad Washington DC (360 guest rooms, 26,310 sq. ft. of meeting space) has an Insta-worthy rooftop with a champagne garden, "a haven of flora and fauna" with unobstructed views of the city's monuments. F&B is guided by chef Bryan Voltaggio, a James Beard and Top Chef finalist.

In Adams Morgan, The LINE DC (220 guest rooms) lets attendees admire the city—with awesome views of the Capitol and Washington Monument—from on high from Vela Rooftop Terrace. This year-round, beautifully landscaped, 5,590-square-foot space can handle 100 or more spaced-out guests and be easily customized.

And where else can your attendees meet in the open air at an address that brought down a presidency? The Top of the Gate rooftop at The Watergate Hotel overlooks the Potomac River, Washington Monument and the Kennedy Center, and can host private events for groups as small as a handful to (at full, non-spaced capacity) up to 300 persons.

Finally, even if fans can't get in, groups can still soak in the team spirit of D.C.'s two major sports stadiums. The Bermuda grass playing field at FedEx Field, home of NFL's Washington team, has 54,000 sq. ft. available for group events, and Bud Lite Pavilion and Hall of Fame Plaza has 60,000 sq. ft. At MLB's Nationals Park, Center Field Plaza—800 or so can distance there—and Delta Terrace are both great spots to host outdoor gatherings.

Virginia



Richmond, Virginia, skyline

“Virginia is for lovers” goes the official tourism slogan—it even adorns the commonwealth’s auto license plates—but let’s turn that on its head: Lovers of Virginia extol the beauty and geographic diversity of their state. In Norfolk, you’ll find the world’s biggest naval base and a modern urban center. The capital, Richmond, boasts fascinating history and a pulsating culinary scene. You can revisit the 18th century in Colonial Williamsburg. The cities and surrounding areas closest to Washington, D.C.—Arlington, Alexandria, Hampton, as well as Loudon and Fairfax counties—offer their own appeal, as well easy access to the Capital District.

The state's meetings areas are equally varied and offer a plentitude of choices in the open air. We'll take a quick tour by region.

Northern Alexandria's biggest story is happening at the waterfront. A new park at the foot of King Street seamlessly connects Old Town's historic retail corridor with the water. At Waterfront Park, visitors enjoy Adirondack chairs overlooking the Potomac, swings, a rotating public art series and special events like the Portside in Old Town Festival, which is still currently scheduled for Oct. 12. Until November, a public art installation in Waterfront Park by Brooklyn-based artist Olalekan Jeyifous captures Alexandria's cultural, architectural and merchant history.

Team building and leadership training were ratcheted up a level in the region with the launch of The Leadership Collection at Alexandria, which offers fully customizable programs, some of them suitable for the outdoors, presented by the George Washington Leadership Institute at Mount Vernon, McChrystal Group Leadership Institute and Building Momentum. They can range from two hours to several days and a one-stop concierge service makes it easy for meeting planners to help their organization achieve its best future.

"Alexandria offers meeting experiences that aren't found in other places," says Lorraine Lloyd, vice president of sales and international marketing for Visit Alexandria. "We're thrilled to offer this new program that provides groundbreaking content with top-end facilitators in one-of-a-kind venues and an inspiring destination that's easily accessible."

One of the eagerly anticipated new attractions in Northern Virginia is National Museum of the United States Army, on 84 acres at Fairfax County's Fort Belvoir, which will celebrate more than 240 years of Army history and honors our nation's soldiers—past, present and future. Exhibits and features include an Experiential Learning Center (ELC), the Army Theater and the Medal of Honor Experience.

Groups can have after-hours access to the ELC and can meet in the theater, which has a 300-degree screen and external sensory elements that promise to "envelop the viewer in sight, sound and movement." The museum also offers several locations at which to host events and receptions—including outdoors. A June opening was delayed but is expected later this year.

Lansdowne Resort and Spa, in Leesburg, is home to one of the best-known conference centers in the mid-Atlantic region. Meeting spaces include 37 dedicated meeting rooms and 55,000 sq. ft. of total function space, which is currently undergoing renovations to transform it into a luxurious, state-of-the-art location for team building, conferences and meetings. The resort boasts 296 newly renovated guest rooms.

But the best way to enjoy Lansdowne's legendary hospitality in the fresh air is on the 3,500-square-foot Outdoor Pavilion, which features poolside event space.

Not far away, in Manassas, The Black Sheep: Whiskey + Wine + Noshery has become a sensation in



Lansdowne Resort and Spa, Leesburg, Virginia

a converted, two-story historic dairy barn with exposed-beam vaulted ceilings. Its fare pays homage to local farms and farmers, presented in comforting dishes like wild mushroom gnocchi and pot roast (but there's sushi, too). The 1929-vintage structure has a dedicated arts and entertainment space as well as private dining rooms in the lower-level barrel-aging quarters, but for now, outdoor seating is perfect for small gatherings.

Central

In the heart of the commonwealth yet within close reach of beaches, mountains and Washington, D.C., Central Virginia encompasses the capital of Richmond, delightful Charlottesville and stunning countryside vistas.

Richmond is a major draw, with its rich history, a major culinary scene, 18,000 hotel rooms and the commonwealth's largest meeting space, Richmond Convention Center (700,000 sq. ft. of meeting space).

Charlottesville is home to University of Virginia, originally designed by Thomas Jefferson, whose Monticello sits on the outskirts; nearby also is Highland, President James Monroe's home, and Shenandoah National Park.

The Quirk Hotel, an 80-room boutique property affiliated with the Hyatt brand, opened in



Paddling in Charlottesville, Virginia

Charlottesville earlier in the year; the modern-design, new-construction build (plus a pair of 19th-century structures that form a multibuilding complex) is its second location, the original being in downtown Richmond. A rooftop bar and restaurant offer 6,000 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor space.

In Gordonsville, Well Hung Vineyard (yes, you read that right—it was started in 2008 by three women “who recognized the value of a good joke and a great glass of wine”) has opened a new tasting room and restaurant in the Historic Main Street District with abundant outdoor seating.

Shenandoah Valley

For 200 miles across the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains, this is a valley of idyllic rural life and backcountry roads, as well as popular Skyline Drive, Blue Ridge Parkway and bountiful outdoor recreation that spans paddle sports and hiking trails to horseback rides.

In Staunton, Blackburn Inn & Conference Center was originally a hospital administration building designed by a protege of Thomas Jefferson. Its classical elements encompass red brick and whitewashed wood trim, classical moldings and dramatic columns, a handcrafted spiral staircase leading to a cupola and rooftop veranda, plus magnificent gardens. A renovation of a large historic building behind the inn will debut as a Wellness and Conference Center later this year and will consist of a 6,000-square-foot meeting and banquet space and several other private



Blackburn Inn & Conference Center, Staunton, Virginia

spaces.

Meantime, among the available gathering spaces is a 2,700-square-foot tent that can be opened for flow-through ventilation and seat 84 socially distanced attendees in rounds, or 90 reception-style.

In Lexington, The Patton Room at The Georges is a brand-new, 1,700-square-foot event venue for corporate retreats, meetings and receptions. It's a natural-light-filled blank canvas with unique details like salvaged windows remade into mirrored rolling screens. An outdoor option is the Garden Terrace, a brick-lined space edged by boxwood, crepe myrtle and hydrangea.



Biking in Staunton

Blue Ridge Highlands

For groups who appreciate getting off the beaten path, check out this area of Southwest Virginia. It calls itself the Birthplace of Country Music, and when conditions permit, it will return to its chockablock calendar of annual festivals and nightly jamborees that celebrate the state's role as a country music pioneer. At any time, it's gorgeous country, a dreamy place of meandering country roads, scenic rivers and rustic trails.

Newest venue is Eagleview Event Center, an airy barn (with lots of windows) that is rustic elegance personified, in Elk Creek. It can accommodate up to 100 well-spaced attendees inside. Outside, among the amenities are hookups for food trucks. The reborn barn is the love child of a retired Navy couple who commit to using local vendors and local staff to help grow the area economy.

The best choice of accommodations nearby is Sessions Hotel, in Bristol, which opened this year. The 70-room, \$20 million project includes Southern Craft BBQ Restaurant, indoor and outdoor music venues, rooftop space and a luxury spa. The hotel is affiliated with Marriott's Tribute Portfolio.

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