

Orlando ready to rebloom for business

CMW SPEAKS TO **CASANDRA MATEJ**, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF VISIT ORLANDO

How has your destination coped with the whole Covid situation to keep in the international

spotlight for event organisers, including any virtual strategies?

Since the early stages of the pandemic, our role has been to unify the Orlando tourism industry. We've created pioneering new programmes, such as partnering with Orlando Health on a medical concierge programme for groups.

We hosted a virtual destination fam with hotels, theme parks, our airport and other destination partners to showcase our safety measures, which was well received by clients, with over 600 attendees. We've also developed a series of Virtual Site Visits for planners looking to host future events to share what's new, and how they can create a memorable and safe event for their attendees.

What is the current state of reopening/restrictions on meetings and event business in your state?

Orlando has led the way in hosting live events since the start of the pandemic, including 100 at the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) alone. The events have ranged in industry and size with everything from a veterinary conference that combined both in-person and virtual components to a youth volleyball tournament with more than 135,000 attendees across two weeks.

Orlando has a proven track record of hosting safe and healthy meetings. Orlando is home to a GBAC accredited OCCC, airport and several of our meetings-focused hotels also have the accreditation.

Currently, our local government leaders urge all residents and visitors to wear masks in indoor spaces, following

CDC guidelines. Orange County government employees, which includes the OCCC, will be required to become fully vaccinated and wear masks indoors.

What investments have been made in the events infrastructure in Orlando over this recent period?

The largest construction project in airport history is underway at Orlando International Airport, The South Terminal Complex. Phase one of the USD\$3.82bn, multi-year project is expected to be substantially completed in the first quarter of 2022. The project will add 15 gates and includes features such as interactive digital media, a state-of-the-art radio frequency baggage system, numerous shops, restaurants, lounge facilities and the Intermodal Terminal Facility (ITF), which is designed to accommodate up to three train systems, including the Brightline train with service to Miami.

What are the major attractions for international organisers

considering Orlando as a destination for their conference and what of your events pipeline?

Orlando is the most visited destination in the US and has been ranked as the nation's No.1 meeting destination in the US by Cvent for six consecutive years. We have one of the largest convention centres in the US, which within the past year has added three studios to help execute the virtual elements in hybrid events.

There are more than 5,200 hotel rooms in four hotels connected to the OCCC. Overall, in our convention district, there are more than 45 hotels, 75-plus world-class restaurants and over 100 unique entertainment experiences within a two-mile radius.

As of 5 August, the OCCC has 52 contracted events through 31 December 2021. In March, OCCC simultaneously hosted the fashion event trio of MAGIC Pop-up Orlando, OFFPRICE Orlando Market and WWIN Orlando Showcase, organised together by Informa Markets, Clarion Events and Tarsus Group. This three-day event was defined as an unqualified success by our organisers.

Despite the pandemic, Orlando continues to open new hotel properties, and many have undergone significant renovations adding new meeting space.

JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek opened in 2020 with 50,000 sq.ft of space. Walt Disney World Swan Reserve will open, 30 September, at the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort complex adding 15,853 sq.ft. of meeting space including two new ballrooms and a rooftop space. The Caribe Royale Orlando completed a \$125m renovation, including a new grand ballroom with 50,000 sq.ft. and Tru by Hilton Orlando Convention Center Area is a new addition to the convention district, located near the West Concourse of the OCCC. ■

Below: Casandra Matej, president and CEO of Visit Orlando

