

SMALL MARKETS

# SMALL MARKETS WITH BIG IMPACT

These under-the-radar gems offer a host of surprising and timely benefits

By Paige Townley

With prices rising, concerns over social distancing lingering, and competition for space increasing, smaller markets are having their moment. In fact, these attractive options deserve more than a moment. Making them mainstays on the list of potential meeting and event destinations offers attendees the opportunity to explore new places, experience unique local culture and community, and discover something off the beaten path.

"You very much feel the local flare when you're in a smaller market like Columbia," says Cheryl Swanson, vice president and general manager of the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center in South Carolina. "You don't get lost in a big city here. You can really experience the destination and get a true feel of it."

That's the same sentiment shared by many smaller markets, with more than enough hotels, meeting spaces, and restaurants. "Here, an iconic city's historic charm and rich past blend seamlessly with modern design and new attractions," notes John Sneed, vice president of sales and services for Wilmington and Beaches CVB in North Carolina, less than four hours southeast of Charlotte, N.C. "Groups can have urban and island experiences all in the span of a single event. Attendees and their families will be compelled to arrive early or stay late and turn an ordinary event into a transformative getaway that thrills the senses. It's more than a meeting. It's an authentic Carolina coastal experience teeming with passion, joy, culture, and adventure."

## Extraordinary atmosphere

Smaller markets offer an authentic atmosphere and opportunities to connect with the community that make it easy to draw attendees. Wilmington checks all the boxes with its scenic riverfront and coastal charm, manageable size, and ample attractions and amenities including



Hedgesville, West Virginia, entertains visitors with the Renaissance Show Fountain, which offers daily sound and light shows. The fountain's movement is inspired by the interwoven 'S' in the state logo.

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Stanton Hall is among the large number of antebellum homes in Natchez, Miss., many of which are open to the public.

the Wilmington Convention Center, which touts itself as the largest boutique convention center on the North Carolina coast. The area's three island beaches cultivate a laid-back vibe along the Atlantic Ocean, inviting business travelers to bring the family along and stay a while.

"To meet here is to encounter a premier destination that offers the perfect combination of city and beach experiences," says Sneed. "Rich Southern culture and historic charm live alongside modern amenities."

The number of meetings in Natchez, Miss.—less than two hours southwest of Jackson, Miss.—is growing, according to Devin Heath, executive director for Visit Natchez. "What we're finding is that attendance for many of the conferences has been boosted when Natchez is announced as the host city," Heath says. "We just hosted a conference here a few weeks ago for one particular group for the very first time, and the attendance for the conference was bigger than it had been in several years."

The increase in a variety of meetings and their attendance, Heath believes, is based on a combination of the town's atmosphere and multifaceted offerings. Situated along the Mississippi River, Natchez and the Natchez

Convention Center provide a unique meeting perspective. "The convention center is just steps away from the river, so on a lunch break, attendees can walk over to the bluff and look out at the riverboats pulling up to port practically every day," Heath says. "There is also a variety of restaurants they can walk to from the convention center and historic attractions that can be walked to from the convention center, as well."

Two hours northwest of Nashville, Tenn., Paducah, Ky., is one of only nine U.S. members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. These cities identify creativity as a central strategic factor in their development. For Paducah, that focus is on crafts and folk-art culture, with a particularly strong quilting tradition. There are numerous cultural attractions throughout the city—which is known as Quilt City USA—including three blocks of colorful murals depicting the city's rich history painted on the floodwall at the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee rivers.

"It's basically a larger-than-life art installation that showcases our local history," says Liz Hammonds, director of marketing and communications for the Paducah CVB. "It's a popular destination, especially for attendees of events held in the area."

### Unique activities

With many groups getting together in person for the first time in two years, it's important to capitalize on that excitement by finding fun destinations with out-of-the-ordinary activities. Some of the most memorable activities are found in smaller markets where attendees can immerse themselves in the local culture.

Less than 90 minutes east of Atlanta, Athens, Ga., offers a unique mix of activities and attractions. "There's a lot of different ways planners can be creative in what they plan for Athens," says Hannah Smith, director of marketing and communications for Visit Athens. "There are wonderful attractions that attendees would love to visit while here."

Athens is home to the University of Georgia, which includes the Georgia Museum of Art and the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. A college town known for its music scene, the Athens Music Walk of Fame is a short walk from the Classic Center convention center and performing arts theater. The award-winning center, with its motto "Be impressed," hosts more than 650 events annually and recently broke ground on a new \$130 million arena scheduled to open in late 2023.

"The Music Walk of Fame is a great way to get the flavor of our city's music heritage,"





With so many bands calling Athens, Ga., home, meeting planners often incorporate musical acts into their events.

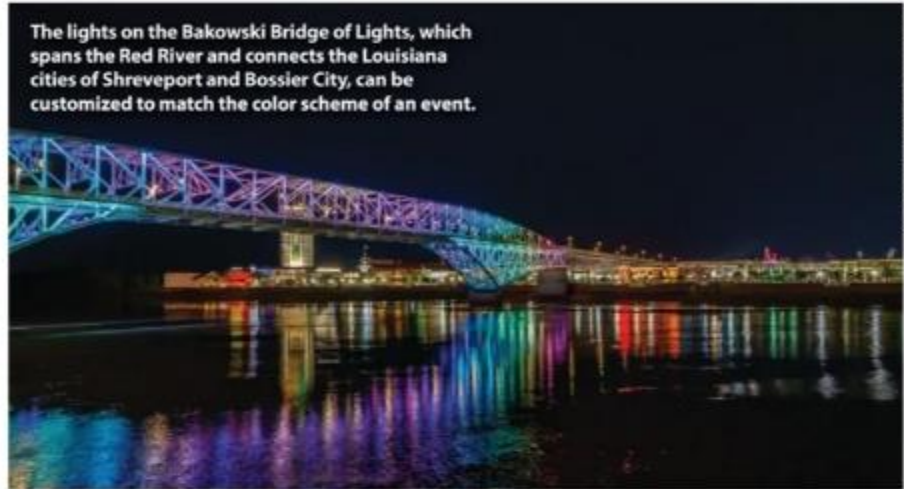
Smith says. “Visitors can use a free app to walk through it and learn more about the musicians and the venue. As there are so many bands that call Athens home, that’s another way we feel planners can take their events to the next level here is by hiring a musician to come in and play at a breakfast or lunch or serve as the evening entertainment.”

Wilmington offers lots of outdoor activities, from paddleboarding and kayaking to biking the river-to-sea trails. Groups can take a narrated river or island cruise to catch the much-celebrated Wilmington sunset. Other tours showcase the city’s history or provide themed group outings, including a craft beer excursion on the Wilmington Ale Trail.

“There are also multiple unique neighborhoods to explore, including the Historic District and South Front District, which is home to older warehouses that have been transformed into hip restaurants, funky brewpubs, and wine bars,” Sneed says. “The area also hosts a busy lineup of festivals and special events throughout the year that may already be taking place during planned meetings and conventions.”

Historic Natchez is Mississippi’s oldest city, with grand antebellum homes visitors can tour and cultural heritage sites and

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The lights on the Bakowski Bridge of Lights, which spans the Red River and connects the Louisiana cities of Shreveport and Bossier City, can be customized to match the color scheme of an event.

Kyle Johnson/Courtesy: John Strimpenot/Bossier



Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia, S.C., is one of the largest mid-sized zoos in the country and a leading destination attraction, drawing one million visitors annually.

Brett Hainstock/Courtesy: Experience Columbia SC

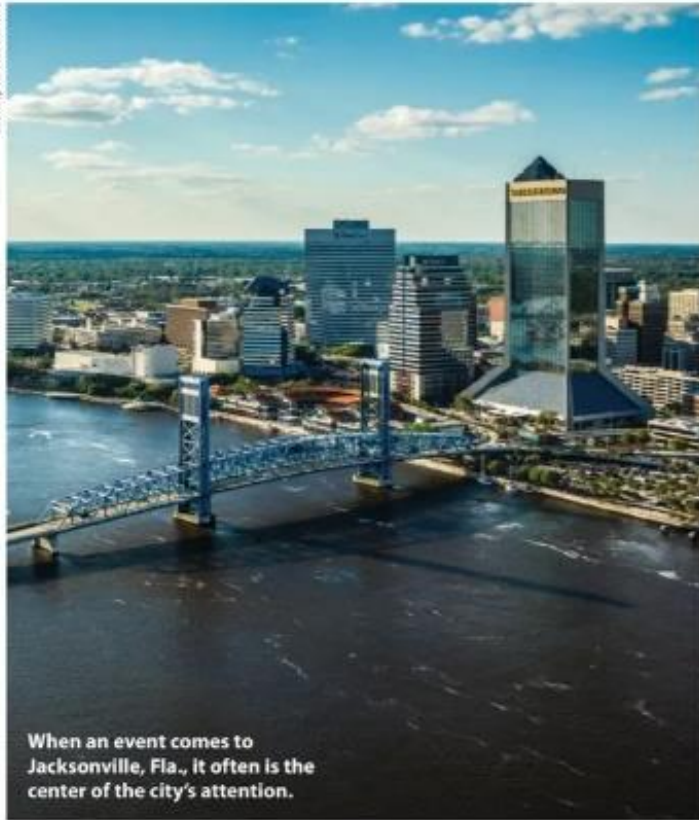


Wilmington, N.C., and the nearby coastal beach towns teem with outdoor and indoor adventures, such as the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

Courtesy: Wilmington and Beaches CVB

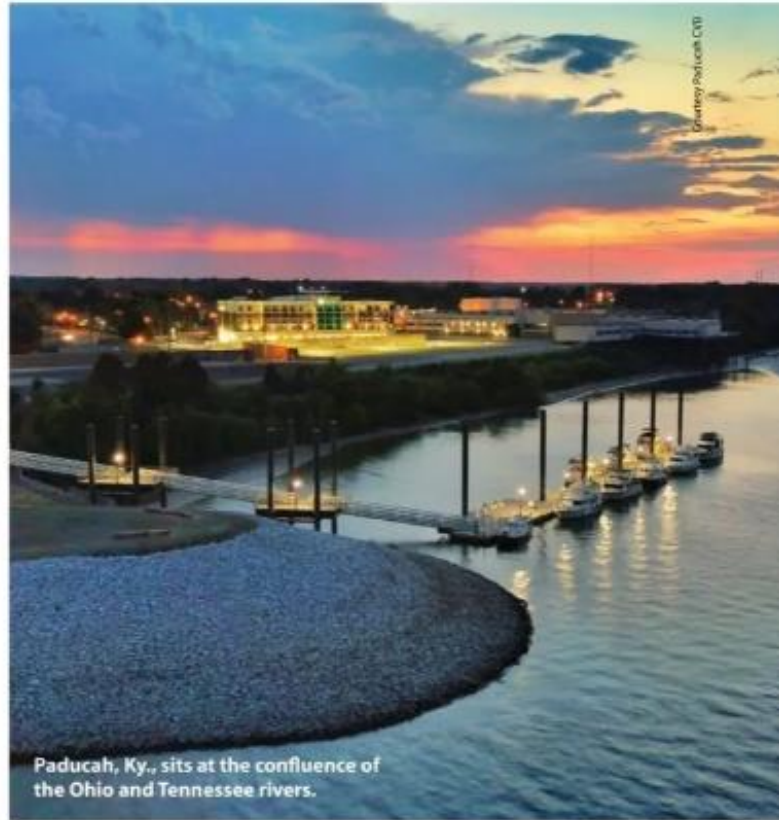


Courtesy Visit Jacksonville



When an event comes to Jacksonville, Fla., it often is the center of the city's attention.

Courtesy Visit CVB CTO



Paducah, Ky., sits at the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee rivers.

monuments. The Civil War-era Natchez National Cemetery overlooking the Mississippi River attracts many visitors, as does the annual hot-air balloon festival.

"There are several double-decker bus tours around town, as well as horse-and-carriage tours and others, that are great for groups to get a bird's-eye view of the city and hear from guides about the many sites," Heath says. "We also host a lot of movie shoots here, so often folks in town for a meeting can see movie shoots going on as well, which is really unique for groups while here."

**Unexpected venues**

Smaller markets offer unexpectedly unique venues for meetings and events. "Hosting a meeting or event in a space that's scenic or unique makes it so special," says Lynda Peters-Jones, director of convention sales for the Paducah CVB. "If an event needs or prefers a convention center, we have a great one, but we also have unique spaces. Anyone knows what it looks like inside a convention center—it can sometimes be more fun to host an event somewhere really remarkable and

memorable that's different from what the attendees are used to."

Paducah has numerous unique venues that speak to the culture of the city, including The National Quilt Museum and the River Discovery Center, an interactive museum that shares the history of the city's rivers complete with a river pilot simulator and working model of a lock and dam. "And that's in addition to the many 'typical' venue types, including the convention center and hotels that offer all sorts of space," Peters-Jones says. "Being a small destination, we can really work with a meeting planner to personalize the experience and incorporate these unique venues into the agenda."

Jacksonville may be one of country's largest cities by area, but the city on Florida's northern Atlantic coast is still considered a smaller market. Yet the area offers the Prime F. Osborne III Convention Center, a variety of unique spaces, and Jacksonville International Airport just 15 minutes from downtown.

"Our convention center's lobby is a historic train depot," says Michael Corrigan, president and CEO of Visit Jacksonville. "It is originally

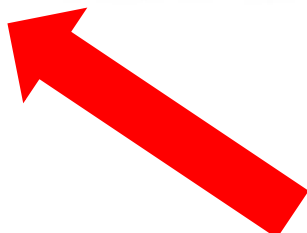
where passenger trains arrived, so it features really high ceilings and is a beautiful space."

Jacksonville offers space at multiple sports practice facilities, as well as Robert E. Jacoby Symphony Hall and the Florida Theatre, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Another fun, high-end venue is The Brumos Collection, which houses Porsche automobiles from the early 1900s until today," Corrigan adds. "It's quite a showstopper."

There's a Porsche connection in the center of Alabama, too. Birmingham, a hip locale that's grabbing attention for its Theatre District, food, and history, is home to the Porsche Track Experience at Barber Motorsports Park. The park, an 880-acre multipurpose racing facility, also includes the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, named by Guinness World Records as the world's largest motorcycle museum.

"The venue is a frequent host of meetings and events," says Steve Pierson, convention sales director for the Greater Birmingham CVB. "Between or after meetings, they will do laps at the track or sometimes even the Porsche driving school. It's really an incredible experience, and it can host both the meeting and the unforgettable activity."





DeKalb County in Georgia is home to the popular Fernbank Museum of Natural History.



Courtesy Discover DeKalb

take you a lot of time to get around while you're here for your meeting."

Ridgeland's proximity to Jackson, the state capital, offers the best of both worlds. "Jackson has some great museums, so you can easily stay in Ridgeland and enjoy the small-town feel here and drive over into Jackson as you wish," Dear says.

Just east of downtown Atlanta, DeKalb County in Georgia often attracts planners with its 80-plus hotels and multiple meeting and event venues. "Besides being so close, we're also just off of four interstates," says Mike Vescio, tour and travel sales manager for Discover DeKalb. "In addition, we're just 10 miles from the airport and offer three MARTA [Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority] stations. It's easy to stay here and take advantage of the better price point, and then travel downtown when needed."

### Big welcomes

No doubt big-name, top-tier markets have much to offer. But smaller cities can be cheaper, less crowded, and easily accessible, sporting unique offerings that allow attendees to experience the flavor of the local community. Such connection can make participants feel they have discovered a hidden gem.

There's a lot of value in a small-town welcome. Large cities can have so much going on that one individual event can get lost in the shuffle. That doesn't happen in a smaller destination, Corrigan says. "We pride ourselves that when your conference is in Jacksonville, you are the most important thing in town," he says. "You're not just another event taking place here."

The Shreveport-Bossier area literally lights up with appreciation for meetings and events with the help of the Bakowski Bridge of Lights, which spans the Red River and connects Shreveport and Bossier City. "It's very cool in that the colors on it can change," Bennett says. "When events come in, we can request to change the colors to match the color scheme of the event or the company's colors."

That kind of attention makes an event stand out; it also makes smaller markets stand out as a great value. "People in smaller cities are warm and welcoming and hospitable, especially in Natchez, and it always surprises many visitors," Heath says. "Visitors often say after coming here that they have made friends for life. It's one of those intangibles of a smaller market that you can't experience just anywhere." ■

Perhaps no small market offers as many historical options as Natchez. Most all its historic homes are available for hosting meetings and gatherings. "The historic homes are amazing experiences and make great reception spots," Heath says. "One of our most famous historic homes is the William Johnson House, which is part of the National Park Service. It's directly across the street from the convention center, so it's easy to walk to.

"Another historic home with a rich history is the Dunleith Historic Inn," Heath continues. When a group of Rolls-Royce enthusiasts met in Natchez, they hosted a dinner at Dunleith. "It was phenomenal because you had the beautiful historic venue with Rolls-Royces lined up in front of it," Heath says. "That certainly made an impact on attendees."

Smaller markets sometimes offer major venues more typically found in large markets. Shreveport, La., about three hours east of Dallas, is home to five casino properties, all of which offer meeting space and other sought-after amenities. "The casinos are perfect for board retreats or those looking for something a little different," says

Jerrica Bennett, public relations and digital content manager for the Shreveport-Bossier CTB. "They offer a more resort-type feel and only add to the other offerings you can find here in Shreveport."

### Easy access

Many smaller markets are located near urban centers, and planners can blend big city amenities with less-expensive and less-congested areas, taking advantage of the benefits of both the big city and the smaller town. Lots of small markets are within driving distance of international airports in major metropolitan areas or are located on interstate highways for driving directly to the destination. And once attendees arrive, getting around in a small city can be easier.

"We are only 15 to 20 minutes max from the airport," says Jana Dear, director of sales and event partnerships for Visit Ridgeland in Mississippi, referring to Jackson-Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport. "It's the same getting around the city—I can be across town in about 10 minutes, and that's including time getting stopped by traffic lights. It won't

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