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meetings

PEOPLE + PLACES

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The festival trend is hot as an inspirational outlet for corporate groups



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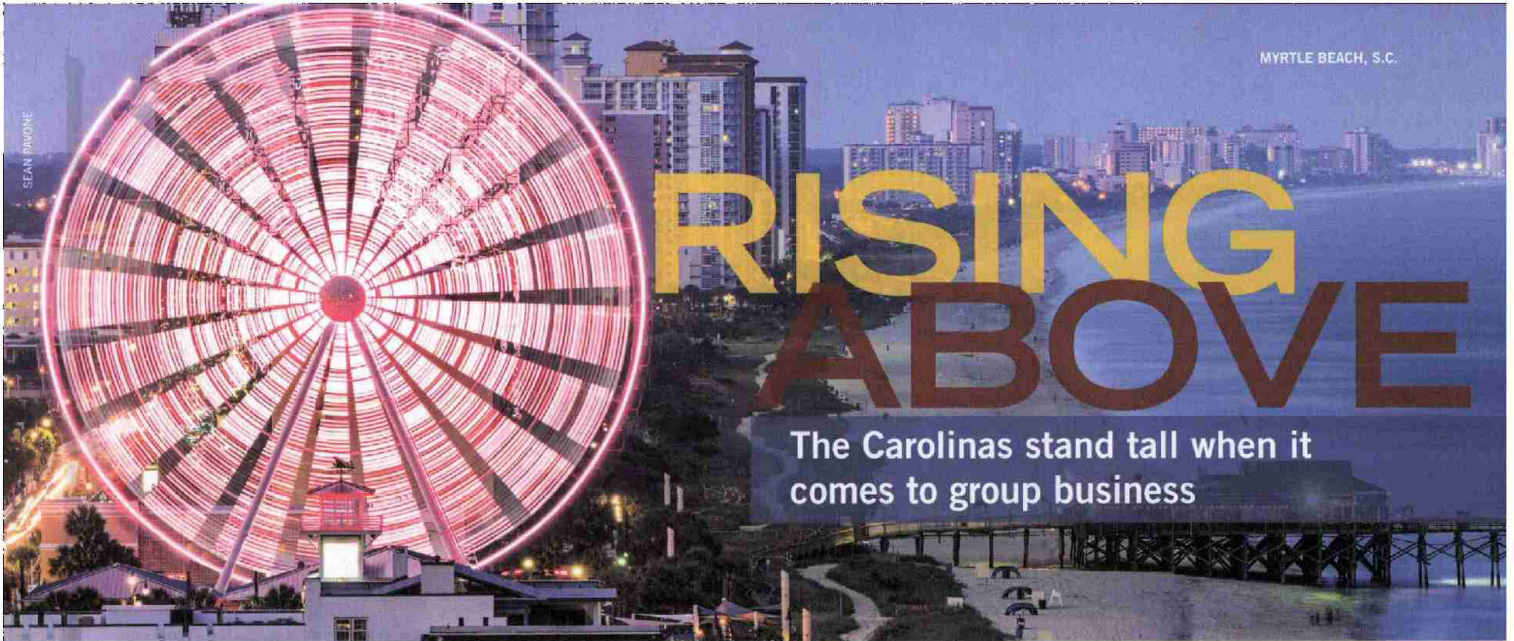
Driving Decisions
Planners share best practices for drive-to meetings

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Airport properties are reaching new heights

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL
MUSIC & ART FESTIVAL,
LAS VEGAS



Hawai'i Convention
Center Meeting
Planners' Guide



MYRTLE BEACH, S.C.

RISING ABOVE

The Carolinas stand tall when it comes to group business



As North Carolina continues to confront legislative and social challenges, the state's enduring appeal as a group destination is not lost on meeting and convention participants, who contributed to a record \$21.9 billion in statewide visitor spending in 2015, up nearly 3 percent from 2014. Attracting nearly 55 million visitors last year to hold its position as the nation's sixth most-visited state, North Carolina and its meetings industry hold true to the core values of welcome and hospitality.

As Durham CVB President & CEO Shelly Green related, while "North Carolina, unfortunately, is suffering due to unpopular legislation that was passed in the spring (referring to House Bill 2, or HB2, limiting certain individual LGBT-related rights), fortunately, all of the elected bodies in Durham have opposed the bill as has the Durham CVB. Convention-goers have found the facilities in Durham to be open and welcoming to all."

Green is not alone. Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority CEO Tom Murray is among other tourism and hospitality leaders who have spoken out against HB2, along with the Charlotte Chamber, North Carolina Restaurant & Lodging Association, and other constituencies.

In South Carolina, the mood is upbeat as group destinations contribute to the Palmetto State's \$19.1 billion tourism industry with new and enhanced group products and infrastructure. Together, these Southern neighbors are focused on positive group outcomes—not sticking points.

NORTH CAROLINA

Mike Butts, vice president of sales for the Charlotte Regional

CHARLOTTE MOTOR SPEEDWAY, CHARLOTTE, N.C.; BILTMORE ESTATE, ASHEVILLE, N.C.; WINDOWS OF CHARLESTON, S.C.; HARBOUR TOWN LIGHTHOUSE, HILTON HEAD ISLAND, S.C.



CHARLESTON, S.C.

is also advancing new initiatives to promote the city and its services to planners.

"One example is 'More Fun On Us,' which incentivizes planners to include unique-to-Asheville assets in their meetings," Brown said. "Another is our 48-Hour Meeting Planner Experience program, which has attracted heightened interest from incentive planners."

The initiatives are clearly paying off. According to Brown, group room bookings are up 7 percent year over year, with an 18 percent increase in estimated group hotel revenue. And there's more to come, with current and planned development adding 1,500-plus rooms to Asheville's already expanded inventory of 7,500-plus rooms.

Historic New Bern is a leading group destination in eastern North Carolina, traditionally hosting associations and state government organizations.

"Welcoming back large association conventions such as the North Carolina Public Health Association, we are currently experiencing an uptick in group business," said Melissa Riggle, tourism and sales executive for the New Bern-Craven County Convention & Visitor Center.

Greenville-Pitt County is also experiencing a lift in association bookings.

"Our hospitality community has been quite successful in increasing the number of statewide and regional groups choosing Greenville," said Greenville-Pitt County Executive Director Andrew Schmidt.

Continuing to expand its hotel inventory and leisure offerings, Wilmington's group market is on strong footing for 2017, as John Sneed, vice president of sales and services at the Wilmington and Beaches CVB explained.

"Association meetings are especially strong, and with significant growth in room inventory, newly opened hotels and others in various stages of development allow us

to refocus our target convention size to accommodate larger regional groups and events," Sneed said.

Home to the nation's top-ranked beach park, Cape Lookout National Seashore, the Crystal Coast is capitalizing on a dominant meetings industry trend of the moment—experience.

"With more planners seeking nontraditional engagements, we are focused on incorporating our abundant natural resources into group activities, while offering memorable venues like the Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores," said Crystal Coast Tourism Authority Executive Director Carol Lohr.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Optimism, inspired by significant growth, also defines the Palmetto State's meetings outlook.

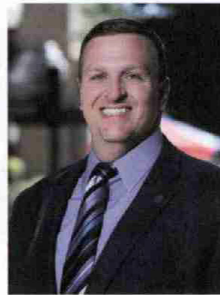
"While mid-week hotel stays continue to set the market, we are recognizing an uptick in weekend business," said Columbia, SC CVB Executive Director Jason Outman.

"After a few down years, our SMERF market is resurgent, with the National Association of Minority Contractors among recent bookings. Looking ahead, we continue to position Columbia as an accessible and affordable location offering Southern hospitality, great restaurants and top-notch attractions."

Charleston remains as irresistible as ever.

"Charleston's many leisure accolades have also increased our visibility as a meetings destination," said Linn Lesesne, chairman of the Charleston Area CVB Board of Governors. "With world-class manufacturers like Boeing and Volvo now calling Charleston home, and new air service to major markets making us even more accessible, it's understandable why more companies and associations are choosing to meet in the Charleston area."

Myrtle Beach is poised for unprecedented growth, with "Grand Strand 2020," a five-year tourism initiative announced in May 2017, including such milestones as attracting 300,000 new group room nights. With key assets such as four-property Kingston Resorts, the largest and most



JASON OUTMAN

comprehensive oceanfront conference venue between Atlantic City and West Palm Beach with versatile space for 2,000-plus guests, the destination is primed for success.

"We are on pace for a record-breaking year, with 15 percent growth over 2015 across all segments, including significant spikes in meetings, conventions and sports," said Myrtle Beach Area CVB Director of Sales Kim DaRocha. "With sights set on 'Grand Strand 2020,' group sales are headed for 230,000-plus definite room nights in 2016, 300,000 annual definite room nights by 2020 and 1.3 million-plus definite room nights generated within the next four years, with an economic impact of more than \$1 billion."

Also bullish is Greenville, as the city expands its footprint of full-service hotels.

"With increasing one-hotel group events from the corporate and association segments, we have added staff to our team to help planners find the ideal home for their event," said David Montgomery, VisitGreenvilleSC's vice president of sales. "We are confident that our mix of world-class hotel brands and award-winning destination fills a unique niche in the region."

Greenville presently offers 8,900-plus rooms within 10 miles of its award-winning downtown, with 48 national hotel brands representing all price points.

Hilton Head Island's popularity reflects the renovation of every oceanfront resort property and private investment of more than \$500 million in new restaurants, shopping areas and resorts over recent years.

"Our group market is doing well," said Charlie Clark, vice president of communications for the Hilton Head Island Visitor & Convention Bureau. "Topping many lists these days, Hilton Head Island was just named the No. 1 island in the continental U.S. by readers of *Travel + Leisure*—which is also a great endorsement for meetings and groups."

Excitement is building in Spartanburg, which hosts the South Carolina Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel in February 2017.

"We anticipate welcoming 500-plus conferees," said Spartanburg CVB Executive Director Chris Jennings. "With downtown business booming, our farm-to-table food scene attracting attention, and developments such the 120-room AC Hotel with panoramic rooftop terrace coming in 2017, the outlook is good." ■