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Destination experiences for meetings + incentives

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Southwest *Inspiration*

Activities for meeting groups draw from this region's distinct spirit. *By Barbara Scofidio*

Whether taking a refeno-making class at the Santa Fe School of Cooking or learning adobe brick laying at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya, the possibilities for immersing groups in the local culture of the Southwest are many and varied.

TUCSON

The newly opened **Old Pueblo Brew Tours** (Tucson's nickname is "pueblo") offers a mobile artisan craft beer journey through a few of the city's best-known breweries, including the established Borderlands Brewing Co. and the new Dillinger Brewing

Co. Tucson made it onto the gastronomy map a couple of years ago when it was named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy—the first city in the US to earn this designation—a bow to its many locally owned restaurants and their use of local ingredients.

Meetings at the **Hilton Tucson El Conquistador Golf & Tennis Resort** draw inspiration from its dramatic locale, nestled at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains. A multimillion renovation started two years ago has brought a new look and feel to its 428 guest rooms and 139 casitas. For events, there are new outdoor

courtyards with sprawling grass lawns and indigenous landscaping surrounding the main pool, dotted with several outdoor fire pits. The resort has added a menu of new attendee experiences, from guided trail rides on horseback and complimentary mountain bikes for exploring the Sonoran desert to morning yoga classes.

"In addition to enjoying the new sleeping rooms and amenities, attendees can now experience guided desert hikes, native hummingbirds and butterflies in the garden, and enjoy the sunset to the performance of a Native American flute player," says Ghee Alexander, general manager of the resort.

A 137-room **AC Hotel by Marriott** is the first new hotel to be built in downtown



“Groups can get the ‘keys to the castle’ and create a truly intimate and exclusive retreat for their attendees.”

Tucson in 30 years—a key piece of a larger redevelopment puzzle. In recent years, the downtown area has also seen new restaurants and retail, a renovation to the **Tucson Museum of Art** and the addition of the **Sun Link Streetcars**, which run from the west side of downtown through the heart of the city and along the Fourth Avenue shopping district.

ALBUQUERQUE

At the **Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa**, locally inspired pottery, bread and adobe brick-making classes are taught by members of the Santa Ana Pueblo along with the hotel staff. Or for an edible team building experience, there's a salsa-making competition. Groups can also volunteer at the **Tamaya Horse Rehabilitation Program**, or hold their own private rodeo. Located between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, the resort is nestled in the foothills of New Mexico's Sandia Mountains and offers 350 pueblo-style guest rooms as well as 34,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

A new program offers groups the chance to buy out the entire property with a booking of 200 rooms in November, December and January, 250 rooms in February and March or 300-room bookings between April and October. “Groups can get the ‘keys to the castle’ and create a truly intimate and exclusive retreat for their

attendees,” says Herb Rackliff, general manager. “Because they don't have to buy all 350 rooms, this option is also a great value.”

The new 118-room **Hotel Chaco** is the first New Mexico property by the well-known global design firm Gensler, drawing inspiration from the Anasazi people and the indigenous ruins of Chaco Canyon. It has 1,400 sf of meeting space and also shares 62,000 sf of event space with the adjacent **Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town**. The 395-room **Hyatt Regency Albuquerque** completed a \$5.6 million renovation at the end of 2016, and the **Hotel Cascade** has been rebranded as a **Wyndham Hotel & Conference Center** and undergone a refresh to its lobby, meeting and guest rooms. It has 300 rooms and 30,000 sf of meeting space, as well as an indoor water park. Just seven minutes from Albuquerque and from the airport, the 201-room **Isleta Resort and Casino** has more than 60,000 sf of meeting and event space, the largest space at 26,000 sf. Resort amenities include a fitness center and the Eagle Golf Club.

SANTA FE

Groups of up to 16 can get hands-on in the kitchen together, cooking up local favorites at the **Santa Fe School of Cooking**. Classes include relleno-making, where they make four different types of chiles rellenos (New Mexican tempura rellenos, ancho chile rellenos, cream cheese-stuffed jalapenos en escabeche and chiles en nogada), taco and burrito making, and a class devoted entirely to hot sauces, from smoky adobo tomato to green chile poblano.

Many meeting planners choosing Santa Fe prefer its historic hotels because of their old world Southwestern charm, among them the 219-room **Eldorado Hotel & Spa** and 180-room **LaFonda on the Plaza**. Inspiring local art is woven throughout many of these charming properties, such as **La Posada de Santa Fe**, which was one of the first places to exhibit the work

Previous page: Hilton Tucson El Conquistador; Left: Santa Fe School of Cooking; Below (clockwise from left): Franklin Mountains Trail Run, El Paso (photo credit: Myke Harmsmeyer); McAllen Convention Center; Hotel Chaco, Albuquerque

of area artists before art galleries were established in Santa Fe. It still maintains a professionally curated gallery of American art today. La Posada de Santa Fe features Southwestern decor in each of its 157 guest rooms—no two of which look alike.

A new addition to the **Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado Santa Fe**, located 10 minutes from downtown Santa Fe in the Sangre de Cristo Foothills, is the luxury tepee, which can be used for small groups of up to 20 people. In this new space, attendees can enjoy spa treatments and sunrise yoga sessions surrounded by nature. The resort has 65 casita guest rooms with a contemporary Southwest flair.

EL PASO

Just outside El Paso, groups can find various ways to experience the rugged, untamed countryside, whether that be extreme biking at **Franklin Mountains State Park** or rock climbing and bouldering at **Hueco Tanks State Park Historical Site**. Or for a more

sedentary experience, travel to the top of Ranger Peak, 5,632 ft above sea level, on the **Wyer Aerial Tramway**. This aerial cable car offers views stretching 7,000 miles and encompassing three states and two countries.

Downtown El Paso has a new \$74 million **Southwest University Park** stadium as well as a recently opened 119-room **Hotel Indigo**. The 357-room **Camino Real**, located directly across the street from the **El Paso Convention Center**, is in the midst of an 18-month, \$75 million renovation. It has 35,000 sf of meeting space.

MCALLEN

Birding is a popular pastime in McAllen, due to its location in the center of the Rio Grande Valley. With 540 recorded bird species and temperate weather, it's a year-round sport, and many of the local specialty birds such as the great parakeet and red-crowned parrot can also be seen right in the downtown area. A weekly

guided "Songbird Stroll" takes attendees around the new **Ebony Grove Pond** with an expert birder. Loaner binoculars are available and private tours can be arranged for groups of 10 or more.

The **McAllen Convention Center** has more than 174,000 sf of meeting space, including a 60,000-sf exhibit hall and four ballrooms. The nearby **Cambria Hotel & Suites** also has its own conference area, with five meeting spaces, including a 3,000-sf BackPerch outdoor patio that opens out from the banquet space and can accommodate up to 200 guests. **Casa De Palmas**, a newly renovated Renaissance hotel, has more than 7,000 sf of meeting space and can accommodate groups of up to 280 people.

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