



By George Seli

Much is made in the meetings industry of the Lone Star State's accessibility to nationwide groups. Such a logistical advantage, of course, merely gilds the lily that is this culturally rich destination, one that many groups would visit even if it were not centrally located. To stage a meeting in Texas is to give attendees a taste of Americana, both present day and historical. Whether it's a sophisticated metropolis like Dallas or Houston, a popular hub like San Antonio's River Walk, Austin's 6th Street, or the sun 'n' fun of Galveston, Texan spirit and hospitality are commonplace. Combine that with "the great outdoors" of the Texas Hill Country and "the great indoors" of the state's stellar meeting facilities, and you have a destination with the resources to make any kind of program a success.

San Antonio

This South Texas city, a seat of "Tejano" or Texan/Latin American culture, is also prominent in sports and fine art. The San Antonio Spurs are one of the NBA's most successful teams, and the recently expanded Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum is Texas' first modern art museum.

Not content to rest on these laurels, the city has initiated a \$216 million improvement project to lengthen its renowned River Walk from two to 13 miles, making it the nation's largest linear park. The expanded River Walk will run through the heart of downtown to San Antonio's four Spanish colonial missions to the south, the historic Pearl Brewery and museums to the north. In addition, Historic Alamo Plaza, the center of the city, is being renovated.

The biggest news in the meetings scene here is the 1,003-room Grand Hyatt San Antonio, which just opened adjacent to the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center. The Hyatt features 115,000 square feet of meeting space, much of which overlooks the famed River Walk.

And in the city's lush Hill Country, the JW Marriott San Antonio Hill Country Resort & Spa recently broke ground. The resort will offer two championship golf courses, a 26,000-square-foot spa, more than 1,000 rooms and suites, and more than 140,000 square feet of meeting space. These hotels add to San Antonio standbys such as the 1,001-room San Antonio Marriott Rivercenter (60,000 square feet of meeting space) and the 508-room Westin La Cantera Resort (39,000 square feet of meeting space).



Golf is one of the many amenities attendees will find at Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa & Convention Center in Galveston. Also located onsite are an IMAX 3D theater, an amusement park, 242 acres of tropical gardens, an aquarium and a spa.

Photo courtesy of Moody Gardens

Destination Texas: San Antonio

Cindy Rosbrook, president and owner of Anthem, AZ-based Conference Solutions LLC, noted that, among her corporate clients, "San Antonio right now seems to be the hot spot in Texas." Rosbrook recently staged a successful incentive program for a Fortune 500 automotive glass company in the city. "I used Hotel Valencia, a boutique property located toward the end of River Walk," she said. Hotel Valencia features 213 guest rooms and almost 7,000 square feet of meeting space. "Everything there is within walking distance," she related. "I scheduled a riverboat cruise for the group in the early afternoon. We did Mexican appetizers, margaritas and tequila shots. They got to see the entire River Walk. We received rave reviews on it."

From a planner's perspective, the service level in San Antonio, from the CVB to the hotels, is one of its best attributes, according to Rosbrook. "In my 10 years of planning, the San Antonio CVB is definitely one of the top two CVBs I've worked with," she said. "And it's hard to put into words the type of service you get at River Walk hotels in general: It's very personalized, and they all work as a team. When I call a hotel with a bid (if the meeting cannot be accommodated at the property), they'll say, 'You know what, it's not going to work at our hotel, but why don't you try this hotel instead? I think it'll be a great fit.' It's very unusual. It's good old Texas hospitality, and every site visit I did was a delight."

Rosbrook's visit to The Alamo, on the other hand, was a solemn, educational experience. "I learned so much. It's fascinating and an absolute must-see for a group meeting in San Antonio," said Rosbrook of the site where in 1836 a Texan garrison bravely held out for 13 days against the Mexican Army. A different expression of the spirit of the American West can be seen at Austin's Briscoe Western Art Museum, scheduled to open this summer.

Practically every major meetings city in Texas, then, has new offerings in store for corporate groups, whether it's new or revitalized lodging space, cultural institutions, multi-use projects or parks. The "Texas roundup" is sure to include many delighted corporate attendees in coming years. **C&IT**