



# SERIOUS FUN

Theme parks for family-friendly meetings BY LISA PLUMMER

**I**magine yourself at a theme park. Probably one of the last things you'd picture yourself doing is engaging in a serious meeting. After all, amusement parks are high-energy places where people go to blow off steam and enjoy a little carefree fun, not focus on business, right? Think again! Theme parks are actually a great option when you're looking for different and entertaining meeting venues offering the best of both worlds: tailored event, banquet and picnic facilities for focused group

activities and meals coupled with exciting rides, attractions and entertainment options for when it's time to cut loose. And now more than ever, amusement parks across the country are going the extra mile to accommodate groups of all shapes and sizes, including company picnics, educational and teambuilding events and private parties. Theme parks are also the perfect venue for youth-oriented events or for groups that want to bring their families.

So whether your group consists of thrill seekers who love the sensation of plunging to earth in a speeding roller-coaster or less adventurous types who'd rather take a gentle spin on a carousel, these entertainment meccas can be a great place to build camaraderie while combining a little business with tons of fun. Here's the low down on several family friendly amusement parks across the country that truly understand the value and importance of meetings and events, especially those of faith.



## DETAILS

**EVENT SPACES/PAVILIONS:** 7

### CAPACITY:

- Good Old Days Picnic Grove:
- 4 shelter houses, 800 people each
  - 1 shelter house, 315 people
  - 1 shelter house, 200 people

Kringle's Banquet Hall:

- Accommodates up to 200 people; includes full PA and AV set up

### EXTRAS:

Each shelter house includes a PA system, which can be tied together if a group is large enough to take up several or all of the shelters. The area also includes volleyball courts and horseshoe pits.

The park provides free parking, soft drinks, sunscreen, Wi-Fi and the use of inner tubes in the water park, which was recently named the top water park in the country by TripAdvisor.

## HOLIDAY WORLD AND SPLASHIN' SAFARI, SANTA CLAUS, IND.

With its wholesome, family friendly reputation, Holiday World and Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, Ind., has become a favorite repeat destination for many faith-based organizations that like the idea of mixing a little business with a lot of holiday spirit. As the first themed park in the U.S. (pre-Disneyland), the formerly named Santa Claus Land now boasts a fun assortment of Christmas, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Fourth of July-themed rides, water slides and attractions suitable for all age groups. With a personable sales team that makes every effort to make groups feel welcome and special, Holiday World also offers seven event spaces that can accommodate a range of events, large and small.

"Faith-based groups appreciate visiting Holiday World because our park is based on Christian principles," says Paula Werne, Holiday World director of public relations. "We believe in service, whether it's greeting visitors with a smile and a kind word, offering free soft

drinks all day long or providing free Wi-Fi and sunscreen."

A fan of the park since childhood, George Dooms, founder and president of Triple T Youth Ministries, has been bringing his organization's annual Tiger Teen Salute summer event to the park for more than three decades. Besides being a great venue for organized group prayer times, meetings, meals and fun, Holiday World fosters a Christian atmosphere, says Dooms, who is comfortable bringing his 20-50 teens, group leaders and their families to the park.

"The neat thing about Holiday World is it really is the cleanest and friendliest park we've ever been to," he says. "The facility that they have lends itself so much to what we do and it certainly is a welcoming place to come. I've never been around any [sales] group that is more astutely aware of the details and is willing to pull out the stops to make sure we're happy."

## DETAILS

### EVENT SPACES/PAVILIONS: 6

### CAPACITY:

- Two 15,000-sq.-ft. pavilions can accommodate up to 1,200 people
- Three indoor theaters can accommodate 200-950 people
- One 10,000-seat amphitheater

### EXTRAS:

The park's group sales department provides planners with all the free promotional materials they need, including email news updates, posters, brochures and maps.



## SIX FLAGS OVERTexas, ARLINGTON, TEXAS

As the saying goes, everything's bigger in Texas and nothing could be closer to the truth than Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington, a sprawling, 212-acre water and theme park that boasts more than 100 rides, shows and attractions. Besides state-of-the-art coasters with death-defying twists, turns and drops, the park draws in all types and sizes of meetings and event groups due to its comprehensive variety of event spaces, including two pavilions, three indoor theaters and an amphitheater.

According to Sharon Parker, communications manager at Six Flags Over Texas, the park is no stranger to hosting groups as large as 35,000 people and has even executed full-scale church services for up to 10,000 worshippers.

"Our professional meeting planners pride themselves on creating

customized packages to suit the individual meeting planner goals," says Parker. "Where else can you have the Looney Tunes characters or the Justice League greeting your guests as they arrive at the park? From teambuilding activities to unique meal options and thrilling rides, an event at Six Flags Over Texas will create lasting impressions with event attendees. It's a wonderful mixture of Texas history and modern-day thrills."

The massive park, which is celebrating its 50-year anniversary, is also within close proximity of 42 hotel properties ranging from full-service to budget conscious. Arlington has become an entertainment headquarters, as Rangers Ballpark and the massive Cowboys Stadium have been added to the neighborhood, bringing with them plenty of parking, restaurants and attractions.



**DETAILS**

**EVENT SPACES/PAVILIONS:** 4

**CAPACITY:**

- Two meeting rooms accommodate up to 100 people each
- One catering pavilion holds up to 3,000 people during rotating meal assignments
- One covered 2,300-seat amphitheater

**EXTRAS:**

Schedule a group event and receive a VIP up-close encounter with one of the park's exotic animals.

The park also offers fun group add-on options, including giraffe feeding, lorikeet feeding, souvenir drink cups or backpacks, and bottomless soda wristbands.

There are 25 hotels within a 15-mile radius of the park.



**WILD ADVENTURES THEME PARK, VALDOSTA, GA.**

Looking for a family friendly theme park with a wild side? Then look no further than Wild Adventures in Valdosta, Ga., a 170-acre amusement, water and wild animal park rolled into one. Besides 15 water attractions, eight roller coasters and more than 50 thrill rides, the park is also home to hundreds of exotic animals, including giraffes, zebras, black bears and Asian elephants. But when it comes to meetings, the park boasts several exclusive event spaces in the heart of the action, including two meeting rooms, a catering pavilion and a 2,300-seat amphitheater.

Able to accommodate events as large as 10,000 people, the park hosts hundreds of groups annually, including schools, family reunions, girls scouts, boy scouts, churches and band festivals. The park's sales department is well-versed in the practice of meetings making a point to work one-on-one with every group to customize event packages.

This willingness to go the extra mile for meetings is what keeps

bringing the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' North Florida Fellowship back to Wild Adventures year after year for its annual Christian Leadership Training event, which hosts approximately 550 middle and high school athletes and coaches each September. Steve McHargue, FCA area representative, says the park is a perfect match for the event for several reasons: its accommodating sales staff, family friendliness and ownership by a faith-based company.

"It's a one-stop destination as far as youth organizations," says McHargue. "You've got great facilities, all the meals are at the park, you don't have to move or transport, then at the end of the training the kids have an opportunity to hang out and develop relationships with kids from other schools. We've done leadership training events forever but to have a theme park that would open its venue for us, that's a win-win for us as leaders and for the kids because at the end of the training there's this huge reward for them."

## DETAILS

### EVENT SPACES/PAVILIONS: 7

#### CAPACITY:

- Two pavilions accommodate up to 250 people each
- Two pavilions accommodate up to 1,000 people each
- One pavilion accommodates up to 3,000 people
- The Trocadero Theater features 3,816 square feet and accommodates 100-500 guests.
- The Elitch Arena provides a stage, sound and lighting with seating for 2,800. It can accommodate up to 5,000 people and has 9,660 square feet of floor space.

#### EXTRAS:

The park is within walking distance of Denver's downtown hotels and the Colorado Convention Center, and is in close proximity to great shopping, restaurants and public transportation.

It features breathtaking 360-degree views of the Denver skyline and Rocky Mountains.



## ELITCH GARDENS THEME AND WATER PARK, DENVER, CO.

Located in the heart of downtown Denver, the historic Elitch Gardens Theme and Water Park is an intimate, 70-acre park that packs a big punch when it comes to hosting meetings and events. With three dedicated event areas, including five pavilions, a ballroom and an arena, the park offers ideal facilities for groups ranging from 10-10,000 people, says Cindy Hann, Elitch general sales manager.

"Elitch Gardens Theme and Water Park is a wonderful place for faith-based groups because it brings people together in a fun and entertaining way," says Hann. "We also offer section and full-park buyouts for the magical experience of having the theme park exclusively for your group, so we're definitely the place to be for your private event or group outing in Denver." Catering packages also are available for groups choosing to use one of the pavilions.

Michael Embrey, executive director of FunME Events, can't think of any better place to be each May when he hosts his annual Elitch Gardens Music Festival in the Park, which attracts more than 100 musical groups and 6,000 attendees. In fact, his event has been such a success at Elitch, he's been hosting it there for an entire decade.

"It's a great destination because they'll bring in major acts in their arenas and concerts," says Embrey. "They have a great [sales] team and the park hosts everything from school groups to corporations, military groups, home school groups, school bands, choirs and orchestras—they run the gamut. The uniqueness about Elitch is it's more condensed so you don't have far to go between rides, which makes it that much more fun for the visitor."



#### DETAILS

**EVENT SPACES/PAVILIONS:** 3

**CAPACITY:**

- Main Pavilion: 300-2,000 people
- Lakeside Pavilion: 200-400 people
- Patio Party Area: 50-150 people

**EXTRAS:**

Recently installed Wooden Warrior, a \$1.6 million rollercoaster.

Less than two miles from the Crowne Plaza Hotel, which offers preferred rates for park guests.



## QUASSY AMUSEMENT PARK, MIDDLEBURY, CONN.

Perched on the scenic shores of Lake Quassapaug in Middlebury, Conn., the historic Quassy Amusement Park is a charming theme and water park featuring many of the amenities one would find at a larger park, packed into a more intimate setting. Besides two-dozen thrill rides and attractions, waterslides and a beach, this 20-acre, country-fresh park also features event facilities suitable for a wide range of meetings and events.

Besides an idyllic picnic grove, Quassy offers three catering facilities, including two pavilions and a patio area that can accommodate groups ranging from 50-2,000 people. Since they're separated from the public, the exclusive facilities allow groups to focus on their own activities while serving as a home base where attendees can reconnect with each other throughout the day. Besides enjoying customized meals that are cooked fresh on-site, groups have the option of bringing in their own activities and entertainment, including music, motivational speakers and teambuilding events.

It's that kind of flexibility and willingness to work with each group's individual needs that sets Quassy apart from many larger theme parks, says co-owner George Frantzis. "We take into consideration the denominations we're dealing with and we work with that," says

Frantzis. "We tend to be a lot more flexible than a lot of corporate organizations that might not be as willing to bend on what they do, so when you work with us internally, we're here to make your day as special as possible. We bend over backwards for our groups and as a result we probably have an 85 percent return rate, not only for churches and camps but also on corporate."

In keeping with that success rate, Reverend Rosalyn Samuels of Marantha Baptist Church said she'll be bringing her congregation back to Quassy for its annual July outing. After their first outing to the park's annual Gospel Day event this past summer, Samuels and her group of 70 church members had such a great experience they plan to make Quassy their event venue of choice.

"It was wonderful," says Samuels. "Gospel Day was great, the entertainment was great, the food was delicious and all the hosts really helped us out step by step. They gave us fliers and announcements in advance, so we didn't have to do anything but collect money. The children enjoyed themselves riding the rides, the older people had a good time and there was enough activity to keep everyone satisfied. We're definitely going back next year."