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GREAT VALUE, GREAT FUN, GREAT MEETINGS

By Lisa Plummer

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These days, when it comes to meetings and events, the Silver State appears to be a treasure trove of opportunity, choices and value.

Nevada is not only a diverse and fun place, offering a wide range of unique, interesting cities varying in size, personality and amenities, but it's also home to several premier meetings and convention destinations. Whether you're seeking the big and glamorous or the intimate and informal, Nevada has it all. And right now couldn't be a better time to plan a meeting there, with more available dates, lower rates and greater value than ever before. These Western cities are not only offering more for the money, they're working harder than ever to attract business—yours.

IT'S NEVADA, NOT NEVAHDAH!

Nothing annoys Nevada's residents more than the mispronunciation of their state's name. Derived from the Spanish word for "snowfall," Nevada is the seventh-largest state in the nation, home to untamed deserts, diverse, hardy plant and animal life, and rugged mountain ranges. Gaze at its expanses of wide open vistas, and you can almost imagine the Old West days when pioneering wagon trains forged their way across the sagebrush-covered landscape as they traveled to Pacific frontiers. While some used it as a stop along the way to elsewhere, others fell in love with Nevada's unique, arid beauty and stayed.

Nicknamed the Silver State due to large silver deposits discovered there by miners in the late 1800s, much of Nevada remains uninhabited and unclaimed to this day, with 85% of its 2.6 million residents primarily concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Las Vegas and Reno. Once a land of adventure and opportunity for miners, cattle ranchers and settlers—and, later, mobsters and casino operators—Nevada is also a land of opportunity for meeting and event planners.

LAS VEGAS

Although the city of Las Vegas has borne its share of hard knocks recently, this premier gaming, entertainment and convention destination refuses to be beaten. With a history of

reinventing itself time and again, from a tiny gambling oasis in the middle of nowhere to one of the world's most popular entertainment destinations, Sin City has been doing what it takes to survive. And promoting itself as a practical and affordable business and leisure destination, rather than one of excess and hedonism, is one sales and marketing tactic that appears to be slowly paying off in the form of increased visitation.

As the trade-show capital of the U.S., Las Vegas has earned bragging rights for hosting some of the country's biggest trade shows, including the International Consumer Electronics Show, PACK EXPO and MAGIC Marketplace. With 10-million sq. ft. of top-notch meeting and convention space and more than 148,000 hotel rooms at its disposal, it's no wonder Sin City houses the largest and most successful shows in the country.

Las Vegas Convention Center.

But until the city fully rebounds from its recent economic hardships, Las Vegas remains a watershed of opportunity for meeting planners, with many resorts offering incredibly competitive hotel and venue rates, incentives and packages, as they strive to keep rooms and meeting spaces filled. And with the plethora of venues to choose from in and around The Strip, there couldn't be more options for cherry-picking planners when it comes to rates, dates and meeting space.

"Las Vegas is still the greatest place to hold a meeting or convention, and the value proposition that can be had right now makes it even better," says Jeremy Handel, spokesman for the [Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority](#). "Our hotel partners are being very aggressive in their strategies to attract meeting clients, which can provide planners with great opportunities to bring their groups here. Bookings are coming back and planners are definitely taking advantage of the value and flexibility that our hotels are offering right now."

Although the city's building boom appears to have ended for the time being, with some industry experts predicting a lull in new resort projects for as long as a decade, a few developments have opened within the last year that have helped pad the city's meeting space inventory with even more quality product.

One of the biggest projects to open last December was the long-anticipated [CityCenter](#), an \$8.5-billion, 67-acre Strip-front "city within a city." The 18-million-square-foot mega-resort includes four high-end hotel properties, a residential complex, a 500,000-square-foot retail

and entertainment center, and a host of public art, water features and outdoor spaces.

As its crown jewel, CityCenter's flagship property is the 61-story [Aria Resort & Casino](#), with 4,004 guest rooms, a 150,000-square-foot casino, an 80,000-square-foot spa and a tri-level, 300,000-square-foot meetings and convention center. The convention space is also one of CityCenter's six buildings that are LEED Gold certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Designed for groups of 10–5,000 delegates, the unofficially named “Aria Convention Space” offers four ballrooms, 38 meeting rooms and two boardrooms. At just under 52,000 sq. ft., the largest ballroom is divisible by 10, with meeting spaces ranging from 800–2,000 sq. ft. It's not only a state-of-the-art facility, but also one that operates with the environment in mind, according to Gail Fitzgerald, Aria vice president of hotel sales and marketing.

“Aria is Las Vegas' newest and most technologically advanced property,” Fitzgerald says. “The unique design elements of the meeting and function space offer a refreshing change for planners and attendees who appreciate the ambience of natural light and the ease of access from our guest rooms and suites. Our Gold LEED rating assures groups that sustainability was foremost in the design and construction of Aria. [And our] group rates continue to offer incredible value,” she says.

Also set to bring more meeting space to the city when it opens at the end of the year is another long-awaited property, the neighboring \$3.5-billion [Cosmopolitan Resort & Casino](#), with almost 3,000 guest rooms and 150,000 sq. ft. of meeting space.

MAJOR MEETINGS VENUES

Since 1959, the sprawling, 3.2-million-square-foot [Las Vegas Convention Center](#) has been the city's anchor convention venue, boasting 2.3- million sq. ft. of exhibit space, along with lobby and concourse areas of 109,515 sq. ft. and 144 meeting rooms (totaling more than 241,000 sq. ft.) able to accommodate 20–2,500 attendees. One of the largest convention centers in the U.S., it hosts 80–100 trade shows and events per year, including some of the country's mega-shows.

Comprised of The Sands Expo and Convention Center and The Venetian/Palazzo Congress Center, the [Las Vegas Sands MegaCenter](#) is the city's second-largest state-of-the-art exhibition and meetings venue, with 2.25-million sq. ft. at its disposal for events.

At the south end of The Strip, the 1.7 million-square-foot [Mandalay Bay Convention Center](#)

includes 1-million sq. ft. of exhibit space, three levels of flexible meeting and event space, and four ballrooms and breakout spaces that can accommodate more than 75 concurrent meetings or functions. Built in 2003, the aesthetically pleasing facility features the largest pillarless hotel ballroom in the U.S. at 100,000 sq. ft.

UNIQUE VENUES AND ACTIVITIES

Whether it's checking out the big cats at MGM Grand's Lion Habitat, experiencing the roller coaster at New York-New York Hotel & Casino, eyeballing the sharks and sea life at the Shark Reef Aquarium at Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino, or admiring the dancing waterfalls at The Bellagio, groups will have no problem staying busy pre- and post-meeting in Las Vegas.

But for groups preferring to meet away from the hustle and bustle of The Strip, and in an eco-friendly setting, the [Springs Preserve](#) is a unique option to consider. Dedicated to sustainability and environmental conservation, the 180-acre nongaming cultural, education and historical center offers a wide variety of indoor and outdoor attractions, including state-of-the-art galleries, museum exhibits, hiking trails, botanical gardens, live desert wildlife, entertainment venues and a two-story, 50,000-square-foot meeting and convention area.

Nancy Rubins' "Big Edge" sculpture at CityCenter.

"The Springs Preserve is designed to provide a forum for meetings, conferences and events in a location that promotes sustainable living through examples of green meeting and event planning, (and) is the perfect location for groups looking for a different Las Vegas experience," says Sonja Robinson, Springs Preserve group sales senior specialist. "Whether your plans include a corporate training session, an educational workshop, a group outing or a social reception, the Springs Preserve has the flexibility and creativity to meet the needs of your group," she says.

Another off-Strip option is [Meet Las Vegas](#), a free-standing, flexible event and exhibition venue, which recently opened in downtown near the Fremont Street Experience. Designed as a high-tech, state-of-the-art "blank canvas" that is able to be fully customized, the three-story, 30,000-square-foot venue and 2,775-square-foot outdoor pavilion can accommodate up to 2,000 meeting guests.

Beyond meeting venues and city action, Las Vegas offers a host of natural attractions and outdoor adventures as well. Exploring the majestic wonders of Red Rock Canyon or

experiencing the scenic, alpine-forested Mount Charleston Recreation Area are great options for day-trip excursions and perfect for hiking, picnicking and sightseeing, depending on the time of year.

LAKE LAS VEGAS/HENDERSON

On the southeast end of the Las Vegas Valley lies Henderson, Nevada's second-largest city. In addition to the [Henderson Convention Center](#), with 14,265 sq. ft. of event space and a 200-seat amphitheater, the city is home to several high-quality resorts with self-contained meetings venues, including the [M Resort Spa Casino](#), with 390 rooms and 60,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, and [Green Valley Ranch Resort](#), offering 490 rooms and 50,000 sq. ft. of space. For more intimate gatherings, the new [7 Hills Conference Center](#) offers 1,400 sq. ft. of state-of-the-art meeting and event space that can accommodate up to 120 people.

However, like Las Vegas, Henderson hasn't been immune to the difficult financial climate. Due to the economic downturn, [Lake Las Vegas Resort](#) lost two properties in recent months: The Ritz-Carlton Lake Las Vegas and Casino MonteLago. However, the Tuscan-style [MonteLago Village Resort](#), with 177 rentable condominiums and 6,127 sq. ft. of meeting space, and [Loews Las Vegas Resort](#), with 493 rooms and 115,000 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, remain open for business (in fact, MonteLago Village Resort was recently acquired by the expanding Aston Hotels & Resorts group). Situated on a 320-acre manmade lake and just 17 miles from The Strip, Lake Las Vegas' resort and venue offerings, as well as its various restaurant, shopping and entertainment amenities, remain a good fit for groups seeking a more self-contained meeting experience.

For outdoor fun, Henderson offers its fair share of choices as well. Besides being home to seven public golf courses, the city is within easy access to the scenic [Lake Mead National Recreation Area](#) and that amazing feat of human ingenuity, [Hoover Dam](#).

LAUGHLIN

Located on the banks of the Colorado River, [Laughlin](#) is known for its numerous water sport and outdoor amenities, including boating, water skiing, kayaking, jet skiing, hiking, swimming, fishing, horseback riding and golfing. Laughlin also has a reputation for offering the personalized service of a small town with the convenience of modern amenities. With nine casino resorts, more than 10,000 hotel rooms and over 125,000 sq. ft. of meeting space citywide, its affordable rates also make the small gaming destination an unbeatable value for business`groups.

“Those who know Laughlin know it’s consistently a great value, and that they can count on it continuing to be a great value in the future,” says Meg McDaniel, senior manager of the Southern Nevada Regional Office of the LVCVA. “We do have a lot of repeat business because we take great care of our customers. Every group or meeting is a big deal in Laughlin, and we give the same great service to everyone.”

Two properties hosting the largest meetings spaces are the [Aquarius Casino Resort](#), with 1,907 guest rooms and 30,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, and the [Riverside Resort Hotel & Casino](#), offering 1,404 guest rooms and 22,000 sq. ft. of space.

A popular choice for many SMERF groups, including military balls, the riverfront destination also plays host to some rather unique gatherings, such as the UFO Congress, which attracts 600 extraterrestrial-enthusiasts from all over the world—or should we say, this planet.

RENO

Located at the base of the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, Reno is northern Nevada’s largest meetings hub, offering a wide range of resorts, meeting and event venues, as well as a host of choice amenities. With approximately 22,000 hotel rooms citywide and 1.5-million sq. ft. of meeting and convention space within the Reno-Tahoe destination, “The Biggest Little City” is also one of the state’s greatest values when it comes to meetings and conventions.

“The region’s hospitality community is committed to offering outstanding value, meeting facilities, customer service and amenities to meeting planners and their groups,” says Ellen Oppenheim, president and CEO of the [Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority](#). “All of the wonderful new amenities available also make Reno-Tahoe an ideal place to host a meeting or convention.”

Along with recent room and event space renovations at several of its major resorts and meetings venues, the destination has been continuing an almost decade-long, \$2-billion period of redevelopment that has resulted in new and improved offerings for residents and visitors alike. One recent project that has helped enhance the revitalization of Reno’s downtown area is the \$50-million AAA baseball stadium, home of the [Reno Aces baseball team](#), a venue that is also available for meetings and events. As part of the \$81-million Aces Ballpark District, the stadium was joined more recently by the [Freight House District](#), a brand-new dining and entertainment destination.

Another newer addition to the region is [The Legends at Sparks Marina](#) , a \$1.2-billion, 1-million-square-foot retail and entertainment center located in the neighboring Sparks area. Among its many shops and restaurant offerings is the world's largest Scheels All Sports store, spanning nearly 300,000 sq. ft.

MEETING VENUES

Reno's many meeting, convention and event venues offer a wide spectrum of spaces able to suit all shapes and sizes of gatherings. As host to more than 70 events per year, the [Reno-Sparks Convention Center](#) is the city's largest convention and meetings venue, offering 500,000 sq. ft of state-of-the-art exhibit and event space that is able to accommodate groups of up to 40,000. Built in 1965, it was most recently expanded in 2002.

As the city's most versatile venue, the [Reno Events Center](#) offers 118,000 sq. ft. of conference and event space, including a 56,000-square-foot, column-free exhibit area and a flexible 7,000 seating capacity. Next door, the two-year old [Reno Ballroom](#) features 32,700 sq. ft. of flexible meeting and event space, including 27,996 sq. ft. that are column-free, with 25-foot-high ceilings, six large meeting rooms and a venue capacity of 2,900 people.

Guest room at the Atlantis Casino Resort Spa, Reno.

Several of the city's 15 hotel and casino properties also offer significant amounts of function space, much of it new and improved. Offering 1,000 guest rooms and 50,000 sq. ft. of expanded and upgraded meeting space, [The Atlantis Casino Resort Spa](#) also has the added convenience of being connected to the RSCC via the new 650-foot, enclosed Skybridge.

Following The Atlantis, the [Peppermill Resort Spa Casino](#) completed a Tuscan-themed expansion and redesign that included a 600 all-suites tower and a column-free, 62,000-square-foot ballroom, the largest of its kind in northern Nevada. Besides 1,630 guest rooms and 102,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, the resort offers a diverse array of dining, entertainment and recreation choices.

Also showing off recent expansions and renovations are the [Grand Sierra Resort & Casino](#), with 1,995 spacious guest rooms and suites, plus more than 200,000 sq. ft. of meeting and event space, and [John Ascuaga's Nugget Casino Resort](#), with more than 1,300 rooms and 110,000 sq. ft. of space.

Besides its quality resorts and venues, Reno is also known for its friendly service and unpretentious attitude, a big appeal for many groups. The destination is considered home base for several wildlife and sporting organizations, including the Safari Club and the Wild Sheep Foundation. According to WSF President and CEO Gray Thornton, the Wild Sheep Foundation Convention and International Sporting Expo, aka “The Sheep Show,” has been held in Reno 19 times out of its 25-year event history for several very good reasons.

“We love the hospitality of the city, the willingness to work with us and know our fundraising business model, and the profitability of our events when they’re in Reno,” Thornton says. “Reno’s just fun to be in. It’s a friendly city, [and it] has also carved out a very effective niche in our industry, providing great value, great service and helping us raise money.”

UNIQUE VENUES AND ACTIVITIES

For downtime outside the ballroom, Reno offers a variety of unique attractions, including the [National Automobile Museum](#), the [National Bowling Stadium](#), the [Nevada Museum of Art](#) and the [Truckee River Whitewater Park](#), a man-made white-water park that runs through the heart of downtown Reno. Designed for kayaks, canoes, rafts and inner tubes, each May the park attracts the world’s best kayakers to compete in the annual Reno River Festival.

Despite its name, [The Reno-Sparks Livestock Events Center](#) isn’t just for cowboys and four-footed creatures; it’s also a fun location that can host special sessions or team-building events for groups. Home to several prestigious equine and rodeo events, including the famed Reno Rodeo, it also hosts a variety of sporting competitions, motocross and monster truck events, as well as consumer shows. Its various features include a 20,000-square-foot exhibition hall and seating for up to 6,200 people.

LAKE TAHOE

With 72 miles of shoreline and 22 miles of crystal-clear waters, Lake Tahoe is one of the most cherished vacation spots in the U.S., one that is visited by more than 3 million people each year. A premier ski, water sport and outdoor recreation destination, Lake Tahoe is home to 18 ski resorts, as well as several hotel properties with quality meetings venues.

Brand new to the region is The Ritz-Carlton Highlands, [Lake Tahoe Hotel & Resort](#), which opened in the Northstar-at-Tahoe ski resort last December. As the first new-build resort development to come to the area in decades, the high-end, year-round destination resort offers 170 guest rooms and 15,000 sq. ft. of meeting and event space that includes a

ballroom, two prefunction areas, an executive boardroom, five flexible meeting rooms and an outdoor terrace.

The Ritz-Carlton Highlands, Lake Tahoe.

Since parts of Lake Tahoe's North and South Shores are located in Nevada, gaming is also part of the overall mix of activities available in the region. With 422 newly renovated rooms and more than 80,000 sq. ft. of indoor/outdoor meeting and event space, the [Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa and Casino](#) is a great option for groups that want to meet on the North Shore. On the South Shore, [Harrah's/Harveys](#) offer 1,272 guest rooms and 42,000 sq. ft. of meeting space combined. Because the properties are joined by an underground walkway, groups can easily take advantage of the various dining and entertainment options available at both resorts.

CARSON CITY/VIRGINIA CITY

As the state's capital, Carson City is not only an intriguing, historic destination famous for its frontier past, but is also home to several unique meeting venues. Built in the 1870s, the [Capitol Building](#) can host groups of up to 172 people, while the [Nevada State Library and Archives](#) offers a large atrium for events of up to 300, with smaller breakout rooms that can accommodate up to 100 people.

For more traditional meeting sites, the city's major meeting venues include the [Plaza Hotel and Conference Center](#), with two meeting rooms that can fit up to 350 guests, and the [Gold Dust West Hotel Casino](#), with 146 rooms and 4,000 sq. ft. of space for up to 200. The new [Courtyard Marriott Carson City](#) is another option for smaller groups, with 100 rooms and a 750-square-foot meeting room.

The city is also known for its nine acclaimed golf courses, seven museums and other outdoor amenities, including The Aquatic Park, with seven miles of white-water rafting and kayaking, and the V&T Railroad, which runs vintage train rides between Carson City and Virginia City from May through October. Recent improvements on the Carson River, including a new white-water rafting and kayaking facility, have added to its allure.

"Carson City offers a wide diversity in its venues, from state-of-the-art to historic and cultural appeal, fantastic dining options and an array of activities for groups," says Janet Jones, group sales manager of the [Carson City Visitors and Convention Bureau](#). "We have a friendly staff

here to assist meeting professionals every step of the way.”

Just 15 miles away is the historic landmark destination [Virginia City](#), an almost perfectly preserved 19th-century silver mining town complete with wooden sidewalks and horse-drawn carriages. Like a trip back in time, the charming western destination includes saloons, hotels, restaurants, shops, museums and mine tours, as well as vintage train and trolley rides. This fun and interesting little town is a great option for day trips and off-site events.

ELKO

Located in the northeastern corner of the state, at the base of the Ruby Mountains between Reno and Salt Lake City, is another historic western destination, the city of Elko. Founded as a railroad-promoted town site and railhead for the White Pine mines in 1869, the unique high-desert city is also an affordable place for meetings. With more than 2,300 rooms and 100,000 sq. ft. of meeting space citywide, Elko offers its fair share of interesting venues, activities and attractions for groups.

Within a short distance from the hotels, restaurants, shopping and museums is the [Elko Convention Center](#), with 20,300 sq. ft. of meeting and convention space, along with an 923-seat auditorium and six meeting rooms. As the largest property in town, [The Red Lion Hotel & Casino](#) offers 222 rooms, gaming and 3,000 sq. ft. of banquet and event space.

Outdoor adventure and activities abound in Elko, including two golf courses, ATV trips, horseback riding and dude ranch experiences, as well as scenic and gold mining tours. The city is also home to several western-themed attractions, including the [Western Folklife Center](#), the [Northeastern Nevada Museum](#) and the [Elko Railroad Park](#), which offers demonstrations, summer storytelling, music festivals and other activities commemorating Elko’s railroad history.

A new attraction is the [California Trail Historic Interpretive Center](#), set to officially open this summer. Focused on the history of westward migration on the California Trail, the 16,000-square-foot museum and educational center will offer multimedia exhibits, life-size dioramas, video productions, outdoor trails and special programs, as well as a meeting room and tours for groups.

“Convention and conference attendees will discover a refreshing sense of energy, basking in the pool of ideas and topics for conversation in a state-of-the-art facility [in Elko],” says Tom Lester, convention and tourism manager for the [Elko Convention & Visitors Authority](#). “Elko

has a memorable style of meeting venue that gets noticed.”

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