

# Natural Selection

BY ROWLAND STITELER



JASON HENSEL



MAJESTIC THEATER

**Finding the  
perfect unique  
venue is often  
difficult, but the  
rewards can be  
immeasurable.**

**M**ost veteran unique venue shoppers will agree that a meeting planner with an unlimited budget doesn't have to be a *summa cum laude* rocket scientist to find the right location for a memorable event.

"If you have unlimited dollars to spend, the choices are incredible these days," said Patricia Coen, CMM, president of Great Chicago (Ill.) Events and a member of the MPI Chicago Area Chapter. "But the far greater likelihood is that you're going to be dealing with a budget that is lower than it was three or four years ago, and your group is still going to expect the event to wow them."

This reality has created an environment in which a planner's ability to locate and book unique event venues becomes a key survival skill. And planners who have that special knack for selecting just the right venue for every group should do well in today's economic environment, according to Dennis Starr, president of Razamataz Events Unlimited in New Rochelle, N.Y.

### The Art of Selection

"The rules have definitely changed in the past few years because of the changes in the ways corporate groups are able to spend money," said Starr, a member of the MPI Greater New York Chapter. "Today, you not only have the limitation of doing more with less money, you have an additional limitation: A lot of

### ShortCut

Call it an art or a science; either way, the process of selecting a unique event venue can involve budgetary discretion, creative theming, dynamic catering, historic locations or destinations with a true getaway feel.

corporate groups are sensitive as to how they are perceived as having spent their money—even when the budget is not limited the venue can't be perceived as being too ostentatious. Consequently, a smart planner in today's environment constantly keeps his or her eyes open for new venues. Venue picking can be a real art."

Like most planners, Starr finds himself

using a broad spectrum of venues. Events currently on his docket include a massive corporate picnic for 3,600 employees of a major energy company—to be held at Playland Amusement Park in Rye, N.Y.—and an upscale incentive in which he is taking a group of college trustees and contributors to Bermuda.

"One thing about venue selection that has not changed is that the venue is the



The David Green Organization (DGO), a Chicago, Ill.-based consulting firm, uses the Skybox of Sheffield—a private home across the street from Wrigley Field in Chicago—for special events.

## Take Me Out to the Ballgame

**T**here's nothing like an old-fashioned baseball game for sheer excitement, but the same frenetic crowd activity that makes the sport so much fun can also make baseball stadiums less-than-ideal venues for small groups.

But the David Green Organization (DGO), a Chicago, Ill.-based consulting firm with a strong clientele among meeting planners and CVBs, seems to have found a venue that offers the best of all options: a private skybox just outside of the stadium.

"This has become such a popular party for us that we do it every year," said Victor Chin, vice president and director of sales for the DGO. "There's a great venue called the Skybox of Sheffield, a private home just across the street from Wrigley Field. They have bleachers on the roof, as well as indoor facilities for cocktail parties and other functions. The views of Major League Baseball's Chicago Cubs games are phenomenal. This year we had a group of more than 100 meeting planners and CVB and hotel company representatives. You get the excitement of the ballgame, but you can hear each other when you want to mingle and chat."

great equalizer," Starr said. "If you can pick a venue so compelling that the people you invite don't want to miss your event, you've achieved one level of success before the event even happens."

Noelle Edwards, CMP, CMM, director of meetings and incentives for California

Host Worldwide Meetings and Events in San Francisco, says that because of the significance of the venue-picking process, it's important for planners to develop their own "radars" for finding just the right places to take groups.

"Most any place can be a venue if you

have the right theme in mind and a sense of imagination," said Edwards, a member of the MPI Northern California Chapter. "That's why it's always important to keep your eyes open. You never know when you are going to find a place that you can actually turn into an event venue by what you do to the place with your theming. It becomes something of an art to have a vision for what you can do with a particular location."

### The Science of Selection

But while the venue-selection skills of some planners constitute an art, there's also a certain amount of science in the mix as well, according to Chuck Salem, CMP, vice president of Unique Venues—a Johnstown, Pa., company that operates [www.uniquevenues.com](http://www.uniquevenues.com), a Web-based venue-finder.

"While it helps to be able to think creatively when you are looking for venues, it is also true that there is a lot of fundamental methodology to the venue-selection process," said Salem, a member of the MPI Pittsburgh Chapter. "You've got factors like the size of your group, your budget and where your group may want to travel (or will need to travel) for the event. There is a lot of basic information about your event that is going to shape your search a bit and make it a logical process."

Uniquevenues.com offers some basic tools for planners such as a venue-requirement checklist, free online RFPs and a search engine that allows anyone who logs on to the site to peruse about 7,000 venues, ranging from conference centers to intimate restaurants for small wedding parties. A print version of the company's guidebook, which lists venues in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, can be obtained at no cost via the Web site.

Salem recommends the RFP process as a good cost-control method of finding unique venues, on the grounds that venues responding to an RFP are essentially bidding for an event and are usually

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aware that others are bidding as well.

A lot of planners favor cost control that stems from a tried-and-true practice in the meeting industry—relationship marketing.

“It only stands to reason that if you’re doing business on an ongoing basis with a vendor, you can get them to cut you a good deal if your budget dictates that you really need that,” Coen said.

### Culinary Creativity

Get yourself a good caterer who can take their work on the road, Coen says, and virtually any gallery, museum, public park or private home becomes a potentially great event venue. Among Coen’s favorite venues in her hometown of Chicago are private galleries and some of the city’s great museums.

“I went to an event at the Chicago

Museum of Science and Industry in which they had bands set up in various parts of the building that matched the theme of the display,” she said. “You put your band in blue jeans and straw hats and put them in the room with a display of old farm equipment and you’ve got instant atmosphere without spending a penny for props.”

That concept of turning a historic collection into an instant venue is quite popular in Bermuda, according to Simon J. Little, director of group sales for Fairmont Hotels Bermuda.

“In Bermuda, people love events in old fortresses, historic mansions and museums—there’s a broad range of options for offsite events. You certainly broaden your options for special-event venues when you know that good catering can go virtually anywhere that suits your fancy.”

That concept is, of course, not limited to Bermuda. Savvy planners all over the world have learned that a little culinary magic can transform any place from a mansion to a city park into a unique venue.

“There’s a lot to be said for an evening under the stars, provided you do your event at a time of year when the weather is right and you are able to provide a dining experience that is a good fit for the occasion,” said Largo Callenbach, managing partner of Ta-Da! Events of Overland Park, Kan., and a member of the MPI Kansas City Chapter.

New Orleans, La., planner Shelley Rote, CMP, DMCP, creative director and managing partner of Signature Events, loves to take events to venues where the great food is—rather than having the food come to the event.

## Boutique Hotels

**W**hen searching for unique venues, many meeting planners are considering boutique hotels. These small properties can offer group experiences not normally found in larger hotels.

The 422-room Hotel 71 is a chic, contemporary hotel located in the heart of Chicago, Ill., featuring 400-square-foot guest rooms, 10,000 square feet of function space, 14 meeting rooms and access to the critically acclaimed Fuse Restaurant. It features an urban design and accessibility to downtown, and it also attracts its share of celebrities. So don’t be surprised if you find yourself in the same elevator as comedian Dave Chappelle or musician Marilyn Manson.

Hotel Monaco—with locations in Chicago; Denver, Colo.; New Orleans, La.; Salt Lake City, Utah; San Francisco, Calif.; Seattle, Wash.; and Washington, D.C.—is extending its individual wellness services and amenities to the business travel market with a Serenity Break Program for group meetings. The program—designed to promote wellness, stress relief, energy building and enhanced productivity—makes available a certified yoga instructor for customized breaks that provide relaxation, exercise and/or meditation classes before, during or after meeting sessions.

The Hotel Montgomery in San Jose, Calif., dates to 1911. Though contemporary in its amenities, the hotel still aims to honor its rich history through an elegant design scheme representing architecture in the Renaissance Revival style with Spanish and Beaux Arts influences. The hotel features six one-bedroom suites, two meeting rooms, a restaurant and a plaza with outdoor seating and bocce ball courts.



Hotel 71—a contemporary boutique hotel in Chicago, Ill.—offers an urban design, accessibility to downtown and plenty of celebrity sightings.

Consular Agency teamed up to host the first-ever International Festival of Altruism.

The resort invited 23 of the town's best-known restaurants to stage an outdoor food fair at CasaMagna, in which representatives of 20 different Puerta Vallarta charities—such as Toys for Tots Vallarta and the Puerta Vallarta office of Make-A-Wish Foundation—were the guests of honor. Members of the local tourism industry were also invited.

"It really was a wonderful way to bring the community together and foster relationships between the charity community and the tourism community," said Kelly Trainor, a U.S. Consular agent who helped plan the event.

### Gotta Get Away

Some planners looking for alternatives to the quintessential hotel conference

rooms are turning to small, getaway-style resorts and even private homes.

Bella Palazzo is a company that offers a collection of private homes in the Phoenix (Ariz.) area, ranging from a 1926 estate; a soaring concrete, glass and steel creation; and a spacious Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced home on seven acres. The homes are available both as event venues for corporate groups and on an architectural tour for functions such as spouse programs.

"Our clients are intrigued with how we live in Arizona and with the many architectural styles that influence our region," says Margie Van Zee, who created the Bella Palazzo collection.

Getaway resorts, where private groups can find true privacy, are increasingly popular as unique venues.

Donna Kerley, executive secretary for

Crossville (Tenn.) Ceramics, has taken a sales group from her company to a secluded meeting at Cheeca Lodge & Spa, a 201-room island resort on Islamorada in the Florida Keys. In addition to a spa, the resort features a big fishing pier from which deep-sea fishing charters depart.

"Sometimes the whole point of a sales getaway like that is to really get away and put your people in an environment that is relaxing and offers the kind of leisure activities they can't find back home," she said.

Near the opposite end of North America from the Florida Keys is another popular getaway for groups. Clayoquot Wilderness Resorts & Spa near Tofino, British Columbia, includes a floating resort at quiet Quait Bay and the Wilderness Outpost on the banks of the nearby Bedwell River, where guests stay in big tents with fine furniture and Persian

## Unique Costa Rica

**W**ith the recent addition of nonstop United Airlines flights from Washington, D.C., Costa Rica—a Central American country known for beaches, exotic bird-watching, whitewater rafting and lush national parks—has become a convenient location for U.S. groups wishing to immerse themselves in the richness of Latin American culture.

Half a dozen big-name air carriers offer flights of two hours or less to Costa Rica from U.S. hubs such as Atlanta, Ga.; Houston, Texas; Miami, Fla.; and Newark, N.J. Major-flag hotels such as San Jose's Real InterContinental Costa Rica offer group programs that give groups a taste of the culture as quickly as 30 minutes after they depart from the airport.

"We have a grand courtyard area with a pavilion, and we transform it into our own version of an authentic Costa Rican market—with produce stands and the like—and then bring in musicians and folkloric dancers for an evening in which guests don't even have to leave the hotel," said Sigurd Jimenez, international sales director for the resort.

Jimenez says groups visiting San Jose also have many choices for half-day adventures.

"San Jose has a variety of great museums and entertainment venues, and just outside of the city you've got coffee plantations, rain forests, a national park with an aerial tram and an incredible volcano park with a botanical garden."

Jimenez's favorite group venues in the area include two museums in historic buildings: the National Children's Museum (a former prison) and the National Museum of Costa Rica, a former army barracks that still bears bullet marks from the 1948 revolution. Both cater to private group events.



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Hotels such as the Real InterContinental Costa Rica offer programs that give groups a taste of the local culture.

## Majestic Meetings

**F**ormer U.S. President Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the most famous U.S. presidential addresses ever in Gettysburg, Pa., and former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower gave many presidential speeches there when the historic town became one of his favorite getaways in the 1950s.

Now the city's 80-year-old Majestic Theater, closed since 1983, is undergoing a \$12 million renovation in preparation for a grand reopening.

A one-and-a-half-hour drive from Washington, D.C., and the historic nature of Gettysburg make the renewed Majestic a natural choice for small and mid-sized meetings, according to Jean Grubesky, a staff member of the Majestic Theater Renovation Project.

"The architectural style the place had when it opened in 1925 is being fully restored," she said.

In addition to restoring the 1,200-seat theater, a new, 200-seat facility for smaller functions is also part of the construction package.

Grubesky says the area is popular not just with history buffs who visit the Gettysburg Civil War battlefield, but with those who gravitate to something else Eisenhower cherished—great golf courses.



The 80-year-old Majestic Theater in Gettysburg, Pa.—closed since 1983—is undergoing a \$12 million renovation and is in preparation for a grand reopening.

carpets. At both locations, the outdoor pleasures of British Columbia prevail, with activities such as fishing, kayaking and whale and bear watching among the most popular for groups.

Strike Holdings—a New York, N.Y., company that operates bowling alleys in Greenwich Village, on Long Island and in Bethesda, Md.—markets its bowling lanes as event venues and has garnered a wide array of corporate clients. The alleys offer not only traditional bowling parties, but private parties in upscale clubs within the bowling complexes.

Regardless of location, the primary value of each unique venue is the same, according to Starr.

"When you get right down to it, your group can get together with each other and have a meeting in any place that will physically hold them all," Starr said. "But when you take them to a venue in which the place itself magnifies the event and

helps it meet its goals, that's when you have chosen your venue well." **TMP**

ROWLAND STITELER is a freelance writer based in Crystal Beach, Fla.



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