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Make a Splash

By Steve Winston

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Fresh ideas at the water's edge

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Traditional thinking has dictated that meetings should be held in cities. And that's how it has often been done, under the assumption that it is easier, convenient or more attractive for attendees.

Now, an increasing number of planners are taking groups to lakeside properties in rural areas, away from the bright lights—and the distractions—of cities.



The pluses? Well, small towns and lake resorts are generally safer than big cities. There are less off-the-premises distractions, so attendees spend more time together, increasing useful networking. And rates are often more reasonable. In addition, because there's generally a more relaxed atmosphere, planners are saying their attendees are more focused—and their meetings more efficient.

There are countless lakeside meeting properties around the U.S. Here are a few to entice you to their shores.

Lake Tahoe

Lake Tahoe, on the California-Nevada border, is 22 miles long and 12 miles wide, surrounded by deep forest and glaciated peaks, and filled with water so clear that you can see 70 feet down into it. It's long been considered one of the most beautiful spots in western America.

Overlooking this grand setting is the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa & Casino. Here planners can utilize 422 guest rooms (including 24 lakeside cottages) and 50,000 sq. ft. of meeting space. "We like to think of ourselves as the world's largest think tank," says John Hernstat, director of sales and marketing at the resort. "There aren't too many places where first-class meeting facilities overlook a panorama like ours."

This mountain-lodge resort was scheduled to complete a comprehensive \$20 million renovation this month. It boasts exquisite dining in the Lone Eagle Grille, along with two other restaurants; a full-service spa called The Stillwater; and the Grand Lodge Casino.

After the meetings? There are two nearby golf courses, where attendees have tee-time privileges. And more recreational opportunities are available than you can count, including charter boats, sightseeing cruises, Jet Skiing, catamarans, hiking, biking and, of course, skiing in winter. There's a private beach, pool and hot tubs. And roasted s'mores can be had around the fire pits every night.

"An increasing number of companies are asking for team-building activities these days," says Hernstat. "And this area's full of them. We can offer Beach Olympics, and kayaking or boating contests on the water. And there are several ball fields near the property."

Lake Michigan



Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, Michigan

In the glistening town of Traverse City, on the shores of mighty Lake Michigan, sits one of the Midwest's great resorts—and one of its best meeting places.

Grand Traverse Resort and Spa is affordable, accessible from just about any Midwest gateway, experienced in holding successful events and self-contained. The only reason to leave, in fact, may be to browse the shops and sites in town or get out on the water. The resort features 600 guest rooms, suites and condos, and 86,500 sq. ft. of flexible meeting space.

"We're in the middle of a beautiful region that produces 70% of the tart cherries in this country and is also a growing wine region, with nearly 30 wineries," says Taryn Miracle, associate director of sales at the resort.

Grand Traverse is also a team builder's dream. Planners can charter boats for fishing contests or plan ones at the Sleeping Bear Dunes (dubbed the Most Beautiful Place in America by *Good Morning, America* viewers). There are three championship golf courses on the premises, including one designed by Jack Nicklaus and one by Gary Player. There are also watercraft rentals in summer and snowmobile riding contests in winter.

An onsite event design manager and a DMC both provide team-building activities. And the resort can create programs such as mini-Olympics, Survivor and CSI, the latter two based on the TV shows. There are four pools, a 100,000-square-foot health club, the Spa Grand Traverse, an indoor water playground, five restaurants and lounges, and nighttime bonfires on the shore.

"For us, The Grand Traverse Resort provides one-stop shopping," says Kathy Klopfenstein, manager of business and customer events for Dow Corning Corporation. "[The resort staff] works within your budget to create spectacular experiences. The meeting spaces are excellent. [The staff] can do everything—AV, photography, props, flowers, etc. And there's so much to do that your attendees stay onsite giving them more opportunities to network. Our people get very excited when they hear we're going to Grand Traverse."

Klopfenstein has actually held several learning and development, incentive and executive management meetings at the resort, generally in autumn, when the foliage is at its breathtaking best. "They'll create a customized program," she adds. "They're very flexible. And they really listen."

Lake Estes



Estes Park Resort, Colorado

Adjacent to Rocky Mountain National Park, sitting on Colorado's Lake Estes at 7,522 feet, is the town of Estes Park. Here lies the always-popular Estes Park Resort, often noted as a favorite in the state for small meetings. "Estes Park is a really charming mountain town," says Jamie Reed, the resort's director of sales. "There's a paved walkway all around the lake; galleries, restaurants and candy shops; and two wineries and a brewery. There's also live music at Bond Park in the summer, and plenty of cowboy sing-alongs."

In addition, meetings can be held in one of the best rooms in the state. The 2,275-square-foot Grand Ballroom has floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Lake Estes and direct access to a covered, heated outdoor deck. The resort has 55 guest rooms including six suites, furnished in a mountain-western motif. And it's only 90 minutes from downtown Denver.

"We're the only hotel on Lake Estes," says Reed. "We have a full-service spa, indoor pool and onsite catering, and we can offer some great team-building options. For one thing, we're surrounded by the Rockies, where you can do everything from hiking and biking to horseback riding and hot-air ballooning. And for another, we're next to the marina, where you can get kayaks, paddleboats or pontoons. We work with a local company to set up team-building activities like canoe races, fishing tournaments, water relays and rafting."

Reed also says that it's not unusual to see elk wandering through the resort, another testament to the area's pure seclusiveness.

Marie Gork, director of student services at Denver's Regis University, runs the annual Conference of the Academic Management Institute on a regular basis at the resort. "Our last meeting there was Feb. 2-4," Gork says. "We brought in 55 attendees from AMI, and 10 speakers and coordinators, to discuss leadership roles for women in higher education. We go there pretty much every year because the rates are reasonable; the meetings are productive; the staff is the best; and the surroundings are stunning. It all makes for a memorable experience for attendees—and that's really what meetings should be all about."

"Our last night we had a snowstorm," says Gork, "and we thought the attendees would be disappointed that they might have to spend an extra night. In fact, their reaction was exactly the opposite—they were thrilled!"

Coeur d'Alene Lake



Coeur d'Alene Resort, Idaho

Up in the Idaho Panhandle, some 90 miles south of Canada, the town of Coeur d'Alene is situated on an alpine lake with 125 miles of shoreline, surrounded by mountains and dense woods.

Coeur d'Alene means "Heart of the Awi," a reference by early French traders to the trading skills of the native Salishan people. The renowned Coeur d'Alene Resort sits right on the lake, and at the foot of the village, with state-of-the-art meeting facilities totaling 43,000 sq. ft., 338 luxurious guest rooms, restaurants, its own cruise boat, its own float plane and magnificent views from just about every room. In addition, it just finished a total renovation.

The Hagadone Event Center (named after newspaper magnate Dwayne Hagadone, the resort's founder) was built last year, with 11,000 sq. ft. of space, its own infinity pool, gardens and all the technological bells and whistles. If not too

distracting for its beauty, groups can meet in a glass-walled room or on a broad lawn looking out over the lake. When the meeting's over, every conceivable type of recreational option—from lake cruises and float plane rides to biking, kayaking, canoeing and hiking—are available. Adjacent Tubbs Hill, a small mountain peninsula jutting into the lake with breathtaking views of mountains and ice-blue water, is a popular spot to take advantage of.

"We can stage a different type of meeting experience in a different type of place," says J.J. Jaeger, director of sales and marketing at the resort. "We provide memorable experiences—and that's what meetings are supposed to be. The village is filled with quaint galleries, shops and restaurants. And between the mountains and the lake, we can also provide an incredible range of team-building options."

The Coeur d'Alene Resort also boasts a golf course accessed by mahogany speedboats. The 14th hole is one of the only movable floating greens in the world.

Becky Burgess, CMP, CMM, is senior director of meetings and conferences for the St. Louis-based National Association of Electrical Distributors. She held a board of directors meeting here in September 2010 with 50 attendees. And she's bringing 150 attendees back here in June for a Women in the Industry Forum.

Burgess says the meetings staff at the resort is extremely professional and always willing to go the extra mile. "For our board meeting, we were invited by Dwayne Hagadone up to his mountain home overlooking the lake," she says. "It was not only a memorable evening, but a wonderful surprise. How many resort owners invite meeting groups into their homes for dinner?"

Lake Placid



Pool at The Whiteface Lodge, Lake Placid, N.Y.

The Whiteface Lodge is not exactly on Lake Placid in New York—it's a half-mile away. But it does have an exclusive lakefront area called the Canoe Club for its guests. Both the lake and town were made famous from hosting two winter Olympics, the most recent one being the memorable 1980 games, in which the underdog U.S. hockey team achieved the Miracle On Ice to win the gold medal.

The lodge, which opened in 2005, has 92 suites and 10,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, along with a 54-seat movie theater. "The Whiteface Lodge is fashioned after the great old Adirondack Mountain camps," says Rosette Press, director of sales for the resort. "We're in the middle of a beautiful little town that's world-famous because of the Olympics, and it's in the Adirondacks. And we can offer meeting planners great [employee-bonding] opportunities all four seasons."

Team building here is different than in most other places. At Whiteface Lodge, planners can work with the Olympic training facility to stage bobsled or skating contests. [Planners] can stage their own Olympic "opening ceremonies," or participate in a biathlon, skiing or skating. They can even take to the speed-skating oval where the champion Eric Heiden won his gold medals. In summertime, groups can hike the mountain trails on scavenger hunts or hold canoe races on the lake. Or they can have a bowling competition in the resort's alley.

Lake Travis

"More than half of our business is meetings," says Jack Bickart, director of sales and marketing at the Lakeway Resort and Spa on the outskirts of Austin, Texas. "They come here because we're in the Hill Country, perched on a cliff overlooking a lake with more than 500 miles of shoreline and surrounded by mesquite trees."

The property features 168 rooms and six villas and 24,000 sq. ft. of meeting space. In addition, planners can hold functions on outdoor decks overlooking Lake Travis. Plus, it's easily accessible—only 30 minutes from downtown Austin. There are four championship golf courses nearby, one designed by Jack Nicklaus. And the San Saba Spa is a full-purpose facility with a view of the lake.

Team-building activities abound here. The Texas Sailing Regatta is a popular boat race for corporate and association groups. There are also fishing tournaments, a poker run (groups sail around the lake, drawing poker cards at each stop), scavenger hunts and ropes courses. And what would a Texas meeting be without a chili cook-off?

Lake Sidney Lanier



Lake Lanier Islands Resort, Buford, Ga.

Less than an hour north of Atlanta is Lake Sidney Lanier, where the islands and forests are dappled by the rays of a sweet Georgia sun.

This is the site of Lake Lanier Islands Resort and the Legacy Lodge and Conference Center. The lodge and conference center is the centerpiece of the resort's 1,500 wooded acres, with 287 guest rooms, villas and lake houses, and 23,000 flexible sq. ft. for meetings, as well as outdoor pavilions that can accommodate up to 400.

Team-building activities are important to the meetings business here, and that's why there are zip lines, biking trails, horseback riding at the equestrian center, miles of hiking trails, sailing, tennis, a ropes course, fishing, water-skiing, kayaking and canoeing available. The Legacy at Lanier Golf Club offers beautiful lake views to go with its challenging bunkers.

Dining options include the Windows Restaurant, and all are accessible by boat. And if you bring the family, the Lanier World area offers family fun and dining.

Around the Country

The resorts surrounding Lake of the Ozarks, in Missouri, offer nearly 2,200 hotel rooms and 350,000 sq. ft. for meetings. This is a special area, infused with mountain culture and filled with colorful vistas and surprising attractions. The two biggest meeting spots are the Tan-Tar-A Resort, with 870 rooms and 90,000 sq. ft., and the Lodge at Four Seasons, with 355 rooms and 65,000 sq. ft.

On the Vermont side of Lake Champlain is Basin Harbor Club, with 74 cottages (one to three bedrooms), guest houses with 42 rooms and suites, 8,700 sq. ft. of meeting space indoors and much more outside. In the nearby capital city of Burlington, Champlain College has enough meeting space for up to 500 people and dorm facilities to house attendees. On the New York side of Lake Champlain, the Adirondack Coast has six hotels with meeting space and six public spaces available.

Located in a secluded wooded area in Alabama, Lake Guntersville State Park Lodge and Convention Center has 112 rooms, 13,800 sq. ft. of space, onsite catering and more recreational pursuits than most could do during 10 meetings.

In Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains, Lake Arrowhead is the site of the UCLA Lake Arrowhead Conference Center & Mountain Resort. The resort boasts 81 condolets (two-bedroom, two-bath units), seven vintage cottages and 21 units in Cedar Lodge, as well as 9,000 sq. ft. for meetings in a sunlit, woodsy ambience. The nearby Lake Arrowhead Resort & Spa has 162 guest rooms and 11 suites, 23,000 sq. ft. of meeting space indoors and out, and the excellent Bin 189 restaurant.

Just outside New Orleans, on Lake Pontchartrain, the Pontchartrain Convention & Civic Center has 46,000 sq. ft. of column-free function space, 14,680 sq. ft. for meetings, and close proximity to New Orleans' attractions, music and restaurants.

In Duluth, Minn., the shores of Lake Superior also attract planners. The Inn on Lake Superior has 175 rooms and 9,000 sq. ft., and the Canal Park Lodge has 116 rooms and meeting spaces for up to 70. Both are blessed with stunning views of the lake.

According to both planners and attendees, the verdict is in: Lake meetings are productive. They're fun and they're memorable. And that's a winning combination.

Steve Winston is a Florida-based writer who has authored or contributed to 17 books.

Main image: Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort Spa & Casino, Nevada

Legends of the Lakes

Lakes, by their very nature, have an element of mystery. They're fertile ground for all kinds of stories—some true, some not—about shipwrecks, creatures and ghosts.

–**The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald:** This one, detailed by Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot, is, unfortunately, true. The S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald was an American freighter that plied the waters of Lake Superior carrying loads of iron ore between Duluth, Minn., and various Great Lakes ports. On Nov. 10, 1975, “when the gales of November came early,” she got caught in a storm and went down with no survivors. Her 1958 christening may have augured some bad signs. It took three bottles before one could be broken against the hull. And as soon as the ship finally slid into the water, it crashed into a pier.

–**The “Nessie” of Lake Champlain:** According to legend—and numerous eyewitnesses—a monster inhabits the depths of Lake Champlain. Samuel de Champlain is said to have written about a creature in his log. The earliest confirmed report of a sighting of “Champ” was in 1819. A so-called “Capt. Crum” saw from his boat “a black monster” that he described as about 187 feet long, with a head like a sea horse’s. According to the good captain, the monster reared its head more than 15 feet out of the water and swam through it “with the utmost velocity.” The captain apparently noticed three teeth, large eyes the color of peeled onions, a white star on its forehead and a red band about its neck.

However, Sandra Mansi’s 1977 account may be more credible. The amateur photographer and her family were driving along the lake when they decided to stop and go down to the shore. As Mansi described it, suddenly, “the head and neck broke the surface of the water.” She grabbed her camera and snapped a photo, which numerous experts have confirmed has never been altered in any way.

–**The Ghosts of Lake Pontchartrain:** Spanish emigre Jose Planas was a legendary figure in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, controlling boat traffic passing from the Bayou St. John into Lake Pontchartrain. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, he returned to Spain, but for some folks, Planas never left. A woman reported seeing “a dark, Spanish man in a Panama-style hat and a linen suit” walking along the bayou and puffing a cigar. “Every now and then he would stop and look at his watch, as if waiting for something or someone.” Then, she said, the image disappeared right in front of her eyes.

Others report the sound of a man shouting in Spanish to workers, and the words “Senor Jose!” shouted back. Other ghostly images have been seen, as well. Once, local college students saw a fire here—about which fire inspectors found no evidence. Residents say it’s common to hear drumming and chanting down where the bayou empties into Lake Pontchartrain.