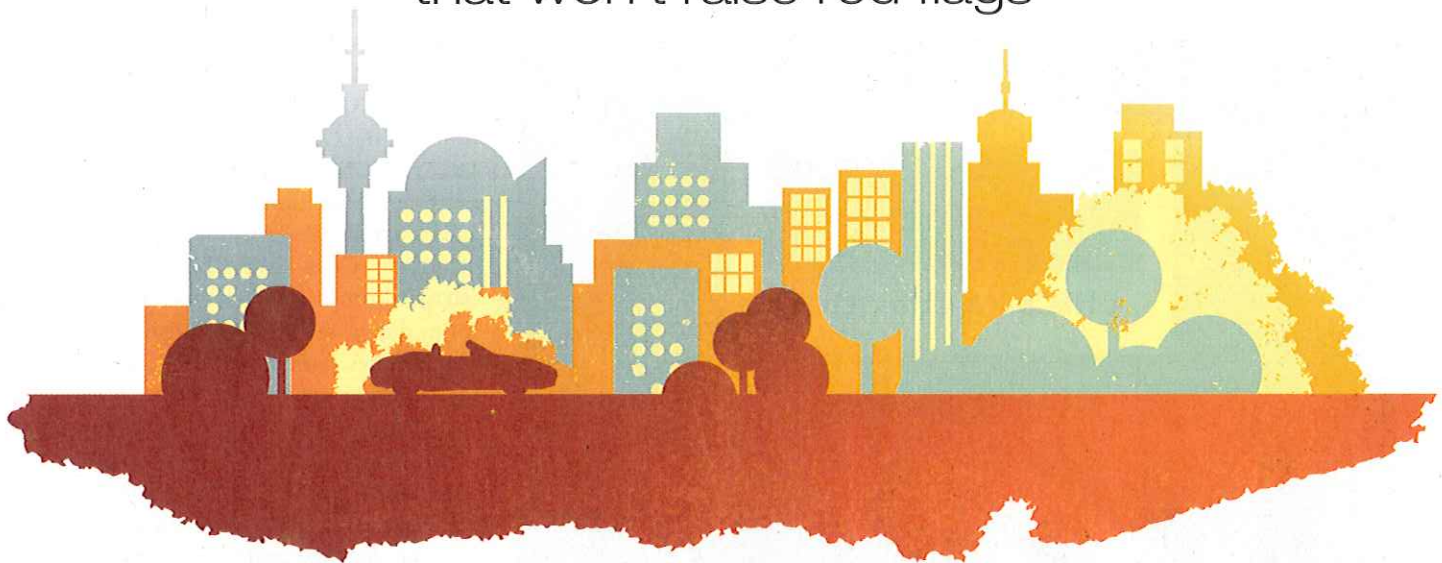


UNDER-THE-RADAR CITIES

Meetings-friendly destinations
that won't raise red flags



BY HUNTER R. SLATON

Oklahoma City. Grand Rapids. Mobile. Syracuse. These are not names that conjure images of glitz, glamour and excess — and that's precisely why these cities suddenly are hot.

In today's perception-obsessed business environment, meeting planners are taking notice of these and other under-the-radar destinations. According to data released by the online meetings management firm StarCite, each of the four cities cited above has experienced big jumps in the number of requests for proposal they've seen for group business. Oklahoma City, number one on StarCite's list, saw an 81 percent spike in RFPs in February 2009 vs. February 2008, while Grand Rapids experienced a 61.5 percent jump.

Kevin Iwamoto, vice president of enterprise strategy for Philadelphia-based StarCite, says anecdotal evidence furthers the case. "I hear from a lot of our customers that there has been increased scrutiny on locations, as well as increased emphasis on avoidance of negative perception," he notes.

Heath Clendenning, a conference producer for Denver-based EUCL, which plans professional development meetings for the energy industry, has seen firsthand this concern about appearances. In the past, he's

preferred to hold events in tier-one cities such as Las Vegas or Miami. But recently, some of his delegates have not been able to get approval to travel to such locales. "There is an absolute direct correlation with perception issues," Clendenning says.

Following are profiles of our four "stealth" cities. All have excellent meetings infrastructure but won't raise red flags with the media or shareholders.

Grand Rapids, Mich.

Grand Rapids/Kent County
Convention & Visitors Bureau
(800) 678-9859; visitgrandrapids.org

"Be a big fish in a small pond," goes a current sales pitch for planners to consider Grand Rapids. Small, however, does not mean dull. Indeed, the city has a surprisingly vibrant visual arts scene, anchored by the presence of the prestigious Kendall College of Art and Design.

Art-loving attendees can check out the Gold LEED-certified GRAM, or Grand Rapids Art Museum (artmuseumgr.org), and the 132-acre Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park (meijergardens.org), which has a 1,700-seat outdoor amphitheater and features the Midwest's largest outdoor sculpture collection.

of fishing options and beachcombing.

The city also has a raucous side, as when revelers jubilantly fling MoonPies, those uniquely Southern marshmallow-and-cake delicacies, during its popular Mardi Gras parades.

But Mobile also gets down to busi-

ness. There are 1,100 guest rooms within walking distance of the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center (251-208-2100; mobileconventions.com). The closest and largest include the 375-room Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel, 209-room Holiday Inn Downtown Historic

District and 170-room Radisson Admiral Semmes Hotel. The convention center has a total of 317,000 square feet of space for meetings and events, including a 100,000-square-foot exhibit hall, a 15,500-square-foot ballroom and 45,000 square feet of outdoor river-terrace space.

A refined Old South accommodation option is the 238-room Battle House, a Renaissance Hotel (866-316-5957; marriott.com), which originally opened in 1852 and later closed for four decades before reopening after a major renovation in summer 2007. Among highlights are the 10,000-square-foot Spa at the Battle House, with eight treatment rooms, plus 28,000 square feet of meeting and event space that includes a 600-person ballroom.

A sure bet for great food is the sleek, chic True (251-344-3334; truedine.com), which opened in November 2007 and has since won local prizes for best new fine-dining restaurant and best chef, as well as an award of excellence from *Wine Spectator*. Serving American-style staples (rack of lamb, duck breast) enlivened by special-occasion ingredients (tomato olive sauce, vanilla-pickled chile peppers), True has a private dining room (complete with A/V hookups) that can accommodate up to 33 people.

Mobile Regional Airport (mobairport.com) provides direct flights from Atlanta; Charlotte, N.C.; Dallas/Fort Worth; Houston; and Memphis, Tenn.



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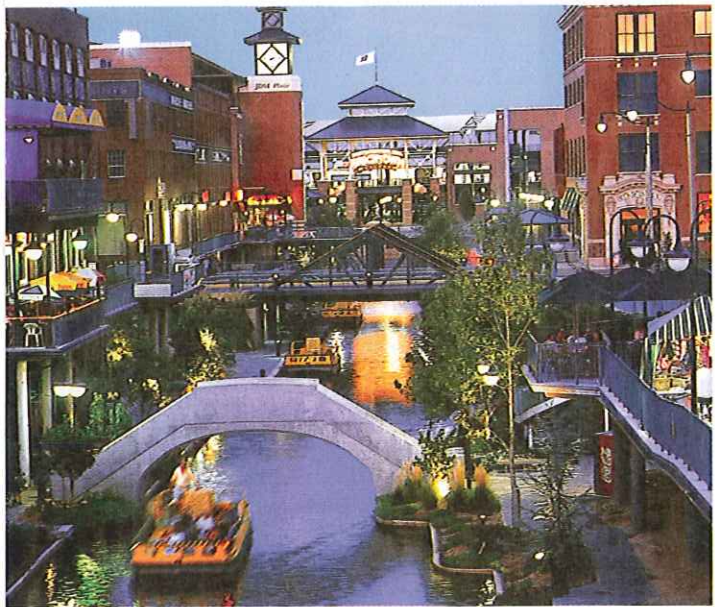


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Oklahoma City
Oklahoma City Convention &
Visitors Bureau
(800) 225-5652; visitokc.com

Oklahoma City's colorful cowboy past can still be experienced at Stockyards City, a public livestock market and meatpacking district that dates from 1910 and continues to ply a heavy trade in steer. Many of the vintage warehouses have been converted into shops and restaurants, where visitors can purchase authentic Western wear and dine on thick steaks.

In recent years, however, this state cap-



Oklahoma City's colorful Bricktown district

ital has been spiffing up its roughneck image, especially thanks to the development of the downtown Bricktown entertainment district (also a former warehouse area) and the addition of an NBA team, the Oklahoma City Thunder (formerly the Seattle SuperSonics), in fall 2008.

The city has 1,615 hotel rooms in its downtown core. Within a few blocks of the Cox Convention Center are the 395-room Sheraton Oklahoma City Hotel, 225-room Courtyard Oklahoma City Downtown, 225-room Skirvin Hilton Hotel Oklahoma City and 108-room Colcord Hotel. The latter, which recently underwent a \$16 million revamp, has the distinction of being OKC's first boutique property and occupies the city's first skyscraper (99 years old and 12 stories tall).

In addition, fresh from a 2008 renovation to the tune of \$4.5 million, the 311-room Renaissance Oklahoma City Renaissance is connected by a skywalk to the Cox Convention Center (405-602-8500; coxconventioncenter.com), which features a 100,000-square-foot exhibit hall, a 25,000-square-foot ballroom and 22 individual meeting rooms (totaling 27,500 square feet).

Among many group-friendly restaurants in Bricktown is Mickey Mantle's Steakhouse (405-272-0777; [\[mantlesteakhouse.com\]\(http://mantlesteakhouse.com\)\), a casual chophouse with two banquet rooms seating 65 and 40, respectively.](http://www.mickey</p>
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Will Rogers World Airport (flyokc.com) welcomes direct flights from 17 U.S. cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York City and Washington, D.C.

Syracuse, N.Y.
Syracuse Convention & Visitors Bureau
(800) 234-4797
visitsyracuse.org

For the past seven years, Syracuse has won the Golden Snowball award, the annual prize in an ongoing competition

for most snowfall held between five New York state cities. An average of 10 feet per winter falls on this patchwork of 26 neighborhoods that began as unique villages and later were unified.

While the city naturally offers numerous skiing options, there also are plenty of year-round cultural attractions to lure attendees, including the Museum of Science & Technology (most.org; upcoming exhibits include this fall's "Rendezvous With Reptiles"); Syracuse Stage (syracusestage.org; the 2009-'10 season includes new productions of Arthur Miller's *The Price* and August Wilson's *Fences*); and the Rosamond Gifford Zoo (rosamondgiffordzoo.org; the Tuesday-night Sunset Safari music series is a local favorite).

Downtown, the Everson Museum of Art (everson.org) features a robust collection of American art spanning two centuries. The building, which was designed by I.M. Pei, can be rented in whole or in part.

Also in the downtown district is the Oncenter Complex (888-797-6623; oncenter.org), made up of three components: The Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center features a 65,000-square-foot exhibit hall, a 15,000-square-foot ballroom and 10 meeting rooms; the War Memorial Arena seats 7,000 and is connected to the Pirro Center, and the John H. Mulroy Civic Center Theaters is a collection of three theaters of varying sizes.

A half mile from the center, the Jefferson Clinton Hotel is a member of the Historic Hotels of America, having opened in 1927. The property was laid low by the Great Depression but was transformed and reopened eight years ago as an upscale 68-room hotel with two meeting rooms.

Less than a mile east of the Oncenter and I-81, Genesee Street is the site of two more upscale properties: the 157-room Genesee Grande and 279-room Renaissance Syracuse.



No snow today: The summertime skyline of Syracuse, N.Y.

Syracuse Hancock International Airport has direct flights from 14 cities, including Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte, Cincinnati, Detroit, New York City and Philadelphia. ■

WEB EXCLUSIVE

For a profile of one more under-the-radar city — Boise, Idaho — visit mcmag.com/webexclusives