

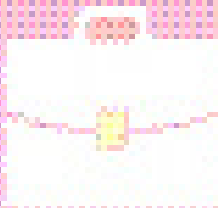
CANCUN

An Oasis for Corporate Meetings

Cancun ranks among the world's most highly regarded destinations for corporate meetings. To learn more, *Convene* checked in with several meeting planners to find out what makes Mexico's popular coastal city an ideal backdrop for business events. ►

BY JULIE RITZER ROSS

Cancun: An Oasis for Corporate Meetings



“Whether it’s a simple request or a complex one, corporate executives and meeting planners don’t like to hear the word ‘no.’ In Cancun they rarely — if ever — have to, because the level of service is unmatched.”

So said James Peluso, president of New Horizons Travel in Atlanta. He should know: Over the past few years, Peluso and his colleagues have booked approximately 40 corporate meetings in Cancun, for groups ranging in size from as few as 25 to as many as 600 people. Such groups have comprised representatives of insurance and manufacturing companies, among others. When bringing corporate groups to Cancun, Peluso favors Palace Resorts properties, which include Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort, Cancun Palace, Sun Palace, Beach Palace, and Le Blanc Spa Resort.

For one recent meeting at the 2,457-room Moon Palace, Peluso planned a dinner and party on the beach, complete with outdoor décor and live music. Sometime during the day of the event, it became clear that heavy rain would necessitate relocating the festivities indoors. Peluso asked hotel staff to see what they could do to recreate the beach ambience to which attendees had been look-

ing forward, and avoid turning the affair into “just another evening” in the ballroom.

“Rather than telling me what would not be possible, as has been the case at other properties, management bent over backward for us,” Peluso said. “They offered to allow us to take sand into the ballroom to simulate a beach, and they contacted all the attendees, room by room, to ask them to bring a handful of [sand] to the party. They also figured out a way to temporarily relocate items belonging to another group that was meeting there so as to accommodate our setup, and found décor that would work indoors. The party was supposed to end at 10:30 p.m., but it was going so well that we asked to reopen one of the restaurants for the guests; that was also not a problem. We went until the wee hours of the morning. You just can’t make these things up.”

Nancy Ketchum, owner of Ketchum Consulting Services, in



Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort

Guest rooms: 2,457

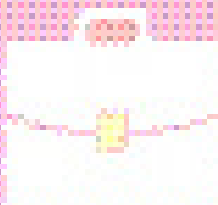
Meeting space: 55,850-square-foot Universal Ballroom (divisible into up to 40 breakout rooms), plus 36,000 square feet of additional conference space on the second floor

On-site recreation and amenities: 13 restaurants, seven outdoor pools, 12 bars (including six swim-up bars), spa, sauna, golf club, two basketball courts, beach volleyball and soccer, disco, watersports marina, two fitness centers, six illuminated tennis courts, dive tank, and more

For more information: Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort; (800) 635-1836 or (800) 346-8225; www.palaceresorts.com/resorts/moon-palace



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High Point, N.C., had a similar experience this past winter during a meeting she planned for about 100 managers and directors from Ascom Network Testing of Reston, Va. One evening, the group — which convened at Cancun's Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Resort — enjoyed a cocktail cruise that was slated to end at 9 p.m. Because of the quantity of hors d'oeuvres served on the boat, Ketchum did not anticipate the need to serve a post-sail dinner. But before the boat had even returned to shore, attendees started asking her what they could look forward to for dinner once they were back at the 602-room property.

Around 8 p.m., Ketchum contacted the hotel by mobile phone and was referred to an on-site "food-and-beverage concierge," who immediately promised to handle the issue. "I myself would have panicked if someone told me I needed to have dinner for 75 people ready in an hour — but not this concierge," Ketchum said. "By the time I got back to the Fiesta, the staff had opened a restaurant that had been closed and laid out a beautiful meal for us, almost like magic. Even better, nobody let on that they had had to scramble to pull together something for us. It looked like it had been planned well in advance."

Additionally, Ketchum said, the Fiesta's F&B staff demonstrated

their service bent by "jumping through hoops" to fulfill her request that meals and related functions be casual and feature an element of creativity "to compensate for the fact that attendees had to be sitting in meetings all day." For example, personnel set up a casual dinner on the beach — with fireworks — and an outdoor reception with a mariachi band. And the F&B department was amenable to the buffet-style meal setup favored by Ketchum and her attendees.

Hands-On Management

A hotel culture that calls for a high level of management and staff involvement in ensuring groups' needs are met also keeps Cancun on planners' lists of favorite corporate meetings destinations. Angel Distefano, promotions director for Leawood, Kan.-based Creative Marketing International, witnessed such involvement first-hand this past spring, when her company — which markets life-insurance and annuity products — sponsored an incentive trip to Cancun. A total of 400 participants, among them 151 insurance-agent clients as well as insurance-company representatives and many guests, stayed at the 371-room Live Aqua Cancun Resort for a total of six days.

"Everything was absolutely seamless, from check-in and check-



Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Cancun Resort & Spa

Guest rooms: 602

Meeting space: More than 80,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor function space

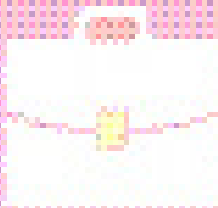
Amenities: Gem Spa, on-site water sports, pool, private beach, six restaurants (three signature and one AAA Five-Diamond), children's program, business center

For more information: Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach Cancun Resort & Spa; (877) 690-1804;

www.grandmeetingsmexico.com



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The overall breadth and caliber of Cancun's hotel facilities and amenities contribute significantly to its suitability for corporate meetings.

out to meals and activities, and the service was great," Distefano said. "However, what really impressed me was how the general manager involved himself in all of the pre-planning, parties, events, and galas, and made certain that everyone was happy. Our attendees have been to many places and taken many trips, but many told me they have never before seen such a level of attention from management."

Much the same has been true for Peluso, who said that the general managers of all Palace Resorts properties at which he has booked meetings — including Sun Palace, Cancun Palace, Le Blanc, and Moon Palace — make a concerted effort to have a working lunch with him whenever he is on-property with a group. Each GM also participates in post-meeting evaluation conferences to assess individual events and brainstorm recommendations for the future.

Similarly, Barbara K. Hickernell, CAE, director of Engineering

Conferences International in New York City, who has brought two corporate meetings to the 678-room Gran Melia Cancun Resort — and said she would not hesitate to return there — is equally impressed with the dedication of the property's staff as a whole. "The conference-services staff is always checking to make certain that the meeting is going as planned and asking if there are any changes in the schedule that they should be aware of," she explained. "In the pre-meeting phase, they offer helpful suggestions so that the planner is confident of the knowledge of the department personnel."

She also appreciates the willingness of Gran Melia's staff to forge connections with appropriate destination management companies should the need arise — an element that is very important when serving corporate groups whose members want to make the most of their time in Cancun. The same goes for Ketchum and Distefano: When one of the DMCs Ketchum contacted in planning Ascom Network Testing's corporate meeting "did not ring a bell" for her, she asked for help from the convention-services department at Fiesta Americana. "Right away, I was given the name of another company, and told that if something did not work out or I had the slightest concern, to come back to the department and the right person would



Gran Melia Cancun

Guest rooms: 678

Meeting space: More than 31,000 square feet

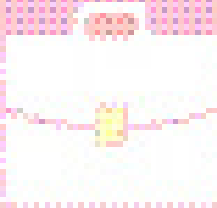
On-site recreation and amenities: Seven restaurants, four bars, three swimming pools, children's pool, nine-hole golf course, spa, wellness center, water sports, and more

For more information: Gran Melia Cancun;

+52 (998) 881 1100; www.granmeliacancun.com



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step in," she recalled. "As it turned out, I didn't need to do so, but it was great to know that I could."

For her part, Distefano "was very happy" to have Live Aqua Cancun's DMC recommendations in hand. "Like the staff of Live Aqua, [staff at] the company I used to set up our transportation and activities — from swimming with the dolphins and trying out the zip lines to snorkeling trips and visits to [the Mayan ruins at] Tulum — took pride in what they were doing, and it showed," she said. "I wasn't steered wrong at all."

Top-Tier Amenities

Planners also noted that the overall breadth and caliber of Cancun's hotel facilities and amenities contribute significantly to its suitability for corporate meetings.

In the case of Gran Melia, "the meeting rooms are modern, coffee breaks are always on time, and the staff is flexible if our schedule changes," Hickernell said. "The main restaurant has a very wide range of good food available at the various stations — everyone can easily find a tasty meal to their own liking. The chefs' stations are particularly popular. In addition to the main restaurant, there are several specialty restaurants for which one makes reservations.

These are more intimate, and are of very high quality, with pleasant and efficient staff."

Hickernell added that the property is extremely conducive to corporate meetings, because even when it is fully booked, it is sufficiently large so as not to appear crowded. The resort's ample beachfront and multiple pools contribute to the impression of spaciousness and lack of crowding.

At Fiesta Americana, Ascom Network Testing's executives were enamored with the concierge who had been assigned to handle their group members' business needs as they learned about a new training program that was to be implemented by the company. "The meeting rooms were flexible, too," Ketchum said. "In one instance we had to completely change the space around to accommodate some audiovisual equipment, and it was done in no more than 30 minutes."

Live Aqua, meanwhile, sold Distefano and her company's guests on the all-inclusive concept. "This was our first all-inclusive, and we weren't certain guests would buy into it because of concerns about the food and etc.," Distefano said. "However, this is true five-star luxury, with fabulous food. They're sold on the experience — and on Cancun as a whole." ■



Live Aqua Cancun

Guest rooms: 371

Meeting space: 13,864-square-foot Grand Aqua Ballroom, plus eight breakout rooms with an additional 3,072 square feet of space

On-site recreation and amenities: Three restaurants; two bars; Shore Club with beachside cabanas, hammocks, music, and more; pool; business center; theme parties

For more information: Live Aqua Cancun; +52 (998) 7629 or +52 (998) 7626; www.feel-aqua.com