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**GO GASTON.
GET OUTSIDE.**



Above is a rendering of the Aloft, adjacent to Wilmington's Coastline Conference and Event Center, and is one of several facilities in the state expanding their offerings by creating an additional 3,000 square feet of meeting space set to open in 2020.

CORPORATE TRAVEL AND MEETING GUIDE

OUT-OF-OFFICE EXPERIENCE

Convention centers and resorts upgrade to cater to the business sector.

From a new, beach house suite at Sanderling Resort in the Outer Banks town of Duck, guests see sunrises over the Atlantic Ocean and sunsets over Currituck Sound.

Below, a professional storyteller at the outdoor fire pit spins tales of sunken ships and pirates, while a company fishing trip spawns lies about the big one that got away.

Sanderling, with five guest houses and 123 hotel rooms, is among several state resorts and convention sites un-

dergoing construction and renovations to attract business conferences, large-scale meetings and other visitors. It's a smart move in a state where tourism spending increased in all counties in 2018, according to the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. Domestic visitors spent nearly \$24 billion in 2017, a 4.2% hike from the previous year, and directly supported 225,700 jobs.

In the oceanside event house, renovated this year for more than \$1 million, meeting areas, a boardroom with breakout space and a large foyer for exhibits provide adaptable gathering spots close to a paradise of pools and spas.

"We didn't know until about nine months out that we would 100% be

doing this project. Now it's live, and it's real, and we're booking it," says Wendy Murray, Sanderling's director of sales and marketing. "It's awesome because you sit right on this little piece of land with the sun rising right across the street and setting behind you. It's amazing. You can't find that kind of space anymore."

In Duck and Beaufort, near the Outer Banks' southern tip, the magnet is remoteness.

The Beaufort Hotel opened in April with two buildings, 133 guest rooms and 10,000 square feet of meeting space. It was immediately booked for two events.

"We sit on Taylor's Creek, a boat channel similar to the Intracoastal

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Waterway, so we're separated from the Atlantic by two islands," says Sales and Marketing Director Wayne Kearney. "But you can sit on the veranda and see dolphins in the waters and wild horses on the [Rachel Carson] Reserve."

Metropolitan sites such as Greensboro's Grandover Resort, the Charlotte Convention Center and destination centers such as Pinehurst have incentives and group packages indicative of their areas. On the southern coast, business gatherings comprise 25% to 30% of

overall room revenue at Wrightsville-Beach's Blockade Runner Beach Resort, and Wilmington's Coastline Conference and Event Center is being renovated adjacent to a seven-story hotel, to be completed in 2020.

In Asheville, the U.S. Cellular Center is changing its name this December to Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville as part of a project that includes \$750,000 in funds specifically marked for fan-experience improvements, such as public Wi-Fi and videoboard upgrades. The building

has 32,000 square feet of exhibit space and hosts everything from craft fairs to concerts and the Russian Ballet Theatre.

COMPANIES ARE NOTICING THE CHANGES.

Association Executives of North Carolina is just one group in need of conferences and events around the state. Rich Phaneuf, CEO and executive director, says the Raleigh-based group looks for properties that understand its unique needs, care about the event regardless of size and are trustworthy.

"Once a property affirmatively answers the above," he says, "we consider, 'Does the property have the meeting space required for our conference? Does the property have the sleeping rooms required for our conference? Has the property developed and maintained its facilities in a manner befitting a professional audience?'"

The Beaufort Hotel, on the site of a former fish-oil plant, coincidentally hosted about 200 commercial fishermen in its ballroom shortly after opening. "We used our best efforts to ready the house and host them," Kearney says. "We're the new kid. We don't have stats on revenue and such because we're new construction, right out of the ground."

Hotel perks include a 180-seat restaurant and bar, workout facilities and boat docks, Kearney says. The target market is associations and corporate groups, along with weddings.

"We would love for this property to do 45% to 50% group business," says Digital Marketing Manager David Cartier. "We have some pretty cool things for people to do in the community. You can't underestimate the historic district."

ADAPTING IS IMPERATIVE.

"We recently hosted a weekendlong sewing seminar for 60 guests, where we transformed a ballroom into 60 stations with electric sewing machines, plus materials and ironing stations," says



With 45,000 square feet of meeting space, the Grandover Resort in Greensboro just celebrated its 20-year anniversary with a \$10 million face-lift.



Sanderling Resort in the Outer Banks has a recently renovated beach house suite boasting a boardroom with breakout meeting space and a large foyer for exhibits.

Christina York, Grandover sales and marketing director. “That was a first for us. For a conference for drone pilots, they asked us at the last minute to create an ‘outdoor classroom’ for them, which we did under a tent with fans and audiovisual.”

Grandover marked its 20th anniversary this year with a more than \$10 million face-lift. Renovations included changing the decor to Piedmont-related interior design and artwork with the Gallery at Grandover showcasing local artists. Amenities include tennis, volleyball, year-round swimming, walking trails and a fitness center, plus redesigned guest rooms and suites.

“Our groups choose us a lot for our location, being right in the center of the state at the intersection of Interstate 85 and I-40. It makes us attractive to guests from here, Virginia and South Carolina,” York says. “The other thing folks appreciate here is that most hotels with 240 rooms don’t have 45,000 square feet of meeting space. It allows a lot of flexibility so they don’t feel like they’re in the same room all the time.”

Meanwhile, a boardroom in the historic Carolina Hotel at Pinehurst has been reinvented with a refrigerator, televisions and custom furnishings. The 7,600-square-foot Cardinal Ballroom has a renovated ceiling, stained-glass doors, new carpet and a ramp for wheelchairs. The Donald Ross Room, in the historic Resort Clubhouse with a view of the Putter Boy statue, has a modernized color scheme and more accessibility to the 70,000-square-foot putting course.

Pinehurst also purchased and renovated Dornoch Cottage, the former home of course architect Donald Ross, who lived there from the 1920s until his death in 1948.

“We’re also investing in Lake Pinehurst to create an event pavilion, scheduled to open in the summer of



Pinehurst, a historic Carolina hotel, has a boardroom recently renovated with a refrigerator, TVs and other custom finishings to help guests feel at home.

2020,” says Media Relations Manager Alex Podlogar.

New Hanover County saw \$578 million in visitor spending in 2017, but Hurricane Florence caused an estimated \$220 million in property damage in the Wilmington area. After the storm, family-owned Blockade Runner Beach Resort remodeled nearly everything, according to Marketing Director Karen Pennington.

“The meeting spaces, lobby and restaurant have beautiful new floors,” Pennington says. “New furnishings in the lobby and restaurant reflect an island theme in a way that brings the outdoors inside — sure to add a breath of fresh air to any business meeting.”

Group business meetings comprise about 25% to 30% of Blockade Runner’s annual room revenue, or about 200 groups a year, Sales Director

Whitney Spratt says, resulting in an estimated \$2 million to \$3 million of attributable revenue.

The resort has 7,000 square feet of function space indoors, plus oceanfront lawns. “In the corporate market, we have seen a major upswing in team-building and can host anything from a casual cornhole tournament with beers, fire pits and s’mores, to a more structured sailing leadership program,” Spratt says.

EXPANDING SPACE FOR EXPANDING NEEDS.

The Coastline Conference and Event Center has a 2020 target opening for its additional 3,000 square feet of meeting space as part of its reconfiguration with the adjoining Aloft Coastline Hotel. Both are in the 2-mile-long Wilmington Riverwalk stretch of hotels, shops and restaur-

CORPORATE TRAVEL AND MEETING GUIDE

rants that have seen \$426.1 million in investment in the last five years.

“The Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau booked 92 events in a recent fiscal year, with an estimated economic impact of \$82.6 million,” says John Sneed, vice president of sales and service. “One of the reasons planners select Wilmington for their events and sports tournaments is because there’s plenty for attendees to see and do before and after the event. Wilmington’s River District features more than 200 restaurants, shops and attractions, most of which are within walking distance of the Wilmington Convention Center.”

Themed walking tours, horse-drawn carriage rides, behind-the-scenes film tours, water-related excursions and the city’s assortment of festivals are perks. Associations and sports organizations make up the primary target market, ac-

ording to Sneed, followed by corporate and religious conventions.

The Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority announced a \$115 million expansion to the 550,000-square-foot Charlotte Convention Center this summer, including increased breakout space and a pedestrian bridge to the Westin Charlotte hotel and light rail station. The 22-year-old convention center will increase meeting space by 50,000 square feet with room to host 54 breakout sessions simultaneously in 600,000 square feet of sellable space. There also will be a reconfiguration of the Richardson Ballroom, with ability to divide it into four 7,700-square-foot breakout spaces.

The center hosted 258 events with 227,238 people in fiscal year 2018, including 43 conventions and trade shows, nine assemblies, 18 consumer shows and 188 local events. “These events enabled the venue to surpass

budget by 4.9% and generate approximately \$19.2 million in revenue for the year,” Communications Director Karen Brand says. The expansions will be complete in 2021.

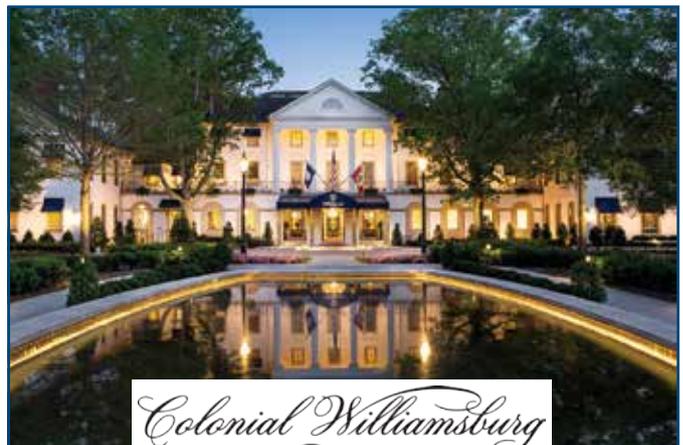
Buildings and atmosphere are vital to successful meetings, but so are intangibles.

“We place the most value on the personal relationships between AENC staff and the location staff. We value trust above all else,” Phaneuf of Association Executives of N.C. says. “We also love working with local CVBs as they are wonderful partners in assuring our attendees have the most enjoyable experience while we are in their city. North Carolina is blessed to have many world-class properties that set the standard for excellence.” ■

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer in eastern North Carolina.*



The Beaufort Hotel, which just opened in April this year, hopes to do 45% to 50% in group business. The goal is to target corporations as well as provide a beautiful wedding venue in its Carson Ballroom, pictured above.



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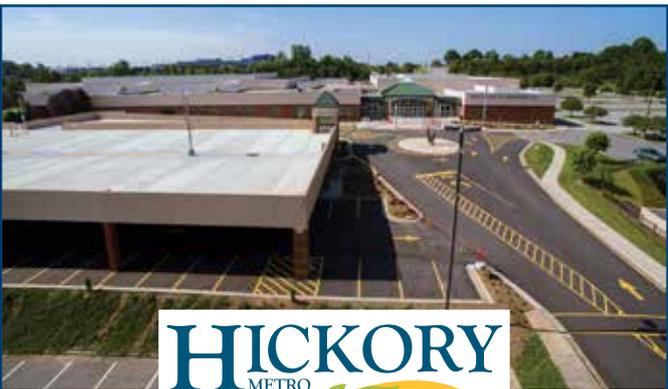
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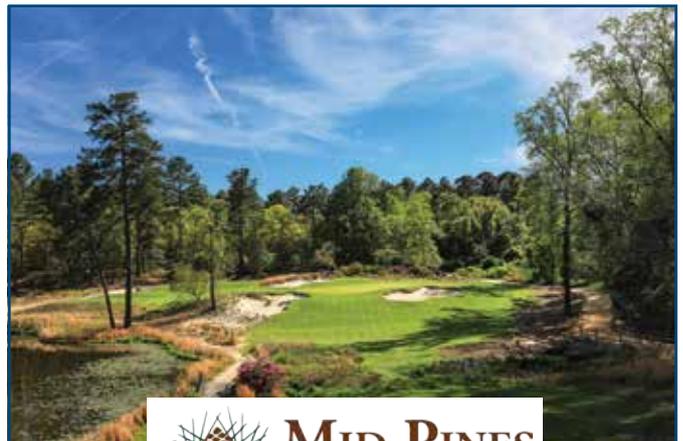
Convention Center & Visitors Bureau

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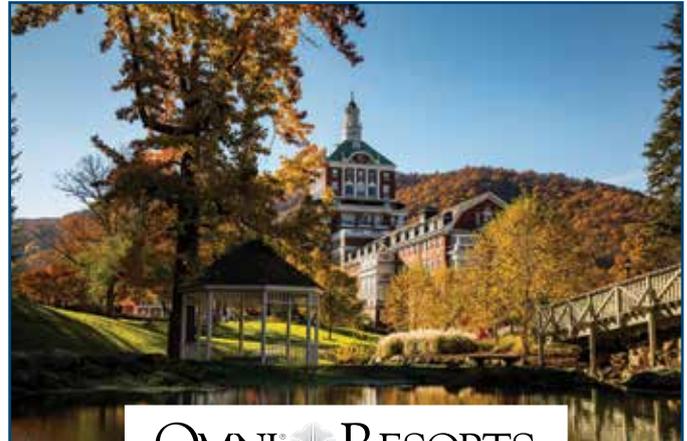


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203 S. Front Street, New Bern, NC 28560
252-637-1551 | visitnewbern.com/conventions

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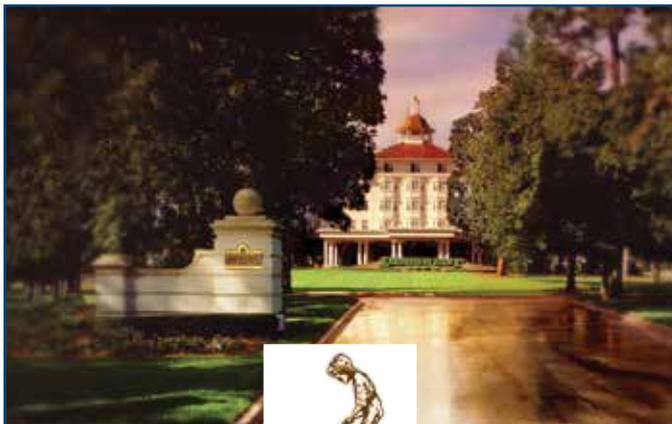
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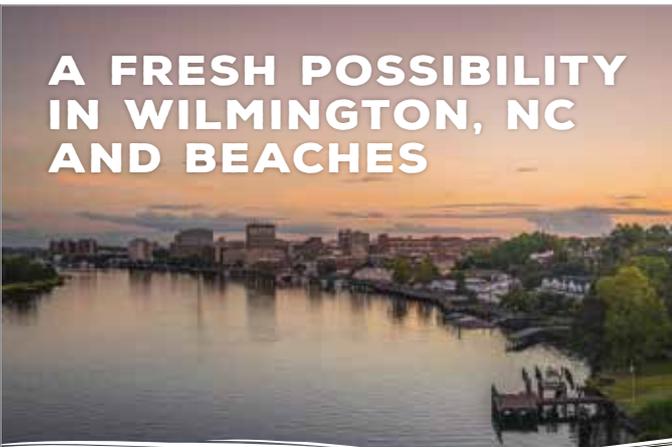


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Wilmington and Beaches CVB
800.650.9064
NCCoastalMeetingsBusiness.com



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VISIT WINSTON-SALEM

Winston-Salem is a charming city that blends its rich Colonial roots and dedication to the arts. Centrally located in downtown Winston-Salem, the multi-million-dollar newly renovated Benton Convention Center features 105,000 square feet of flexible meeting space with architectural nods to Winston-Salem's historic arts, tobacco and textile past.

200 Brookstown Avenue, Winston-Salem, NC 27101
336-728-4200 | VisitWinstonSalem.com

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