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Topping the Charts



New group-ready facilities and old favorites are music to the ears in Central West Tennessee

BY TYLER DAVIDSON

While the news out of Nashville during PCMA's January 2018 Convening Leaders was all about Music City's full to bursting hotel pipeline, it's also a refrain that plays in other cities in the central-west part of the state.

Nashville

With a music offering that is second to none and a restaurant scene that is starting to get international attention, Nashville has always had the goods for groups if not the guest rooms to accommodate them.

That's changing in a big, big way, with 14,246 rooms in the pipeline and 5,345 rooms under construction, according to the Nashville CVB. In 2018 alone 14 hotels with 2,639 rooms are set to open.

"Every corner has a hotel going up—we're busier than a one-armed paper hanger," said Kay Witt, chief sales officer for

the Nashville CVB, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek but adding that 500 rooms have already come on-line in the three months following the close of Convening Leaders. "We didn't have the supply when we first opened the convention center and the Omni [Nashville] Hotel opened in 2014. Frankly, now we almost have the opposite problem in that we have so much supply."

Major new hotels and other developments include the following:

- The **JW Marriott Nashville** is set to contribute 533 rooms and 50,000 square feet of meeting space downtown in a 33-story glass tower offering panoramic views of the Nashville skyline. The property, which will feature the award-winning Bourbon Steak by famed restaurateur Michael Mina, is projected to open in July 2018 and is located adjacent to Music City Center and near the Bridgestone Arena.
- A 591-room **Hyatt Regency** with 70,000 square feet of meeting space is scheduled to open downtown in May 2020 in a new mixed-use urban development. The \$1 billion Nashville Yards will offer a total of 1,100 hotel rooms and 600,000 square feet of retail

and entertainment space.

- The 260-room **Virgin Hotel**, with 10,000 square feet of meeting space, is scheduled to open downtown in December 2019.
- The 217-room **Margaritaville Hotel**, with 4,000 square feet of meeting space, is scheduled to open in the SoBro neighborhood in December 2019.
- The 169-room **Dream Nashville**, with 3,265 square feet of meeting space, is scheduled to open downtown in December 2018.
- **Holston House**, part of Hyatt's Unbound Collection, opened downtown near Broadway in January 2018 with 191 rooms and five meeting venues offering a total of 2,233 square feet of space.
- The four-acre, three-level **SoundWaves** indoor/outdoor waterpark is scheduled to open in late 2018 at Gaylord Opryland.

Of course, the longtime group favorite is Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, which has grown by leaps and bounds to epitomize the modern massive convention property since its opening in 1977. The mammoth property boasts 2,882 guest rooms, more than 100 conference



GRACELAND DINING, MEMPHIS ROOM, MEMPHIS

and breakout rooms, six ballrooms and Ryman Exhibit Hall, with more than 260,000 square feet of space, making it the largest non-gaming, in-hotel exhibit space in the world, according to the property.

While lots of new product is the tune everyone in the tourism business is whistling, the tried-and-true selling point in Nashville will always be its music scene. You pretty much can't go anywhere without encountering a polished musician or aspiring singer-songwriter practicing their craft.

"For us in Nashville it's all about the brand, and the brand for us is Music City," said Witt, who added that a new direct flight to London on British Airways should bring in music fans from the U.K. and other points in Europe. "Certainly on the international side there's some fascination with the music."

According to Witt, major music venue happenings include a new spot by Dierks Bentley, named Florida Georgia Line, and a partnership between country star Blake Shelton, in conjunction with Ryman Entertainment, on Ole Red Nashville at Gaylord Opryland.

"It's been interesting watching these artists jump in, whether they live in our community or not," Witt said. "They're investing in us."

Meeting planners would miss a major opportunity if they didn't check in with the CVB about hiring a local songwriter to perform at their event, with Witt mentioning Brett James, writer of *Jesus Take the Wheel*, as but one good example in a city that is the world capital of songwriting.

And Music City isn't going hungry for new bars and restaurants, either, according to Witt, who said that since 2015 Nashville has added more than 250 new venues, with 43 more open so far in 2018 and another 106 expected to welcome customers before the year wraps.

Memphis

Memphis is no slouch when it comes to



B.B. KING'S BLUES CLUB,
BEALE STREET, MEMPHIS

top-shelf music destinations, either, being a birthplace of the blues and the home of Elvis.

The big news here is a major expansion of the Memphis Cook Convention Center, a \$175 million project that is scheduled to break ground this summer.

Designed by Atlanta's TVS Design, which managed the successful renovation and expansion of Detroit's COBO Center and is currently also working on the 1.4 million-square-foot Las Vegas Convention Center expansion, the reimagined facility will add a 125,000-square-foot exhibit hall and modernize and expand the facility's existing breakout rooms, maximizing the venue's location on the Mississippi River.

"We're bringing the building up to the river," said Kevin Kern, vice president of communications for the Memphis CVB. [TVS Design] came to Memphis and said, 'You have a big building on riverfront, although you don't take advantage of being on the riverfront. You have a great footprint here, we think we can transform it into being a modern, 21st century convention center.'

"Now the convention center will incorporate its surroundings more positively," Kern added. "We have a great opportunity because we're right on the Mississippi River. It's a transformation inside and out—we're skinning the building."

Kern expects a new 600-room hotel with meeting space to be added close to the convention center, which currently has the 600-room Sheraton Memphis Downtown Hotel attached to it. Kern added that the convention center will remain open during the project and when it is finished in the fourth quarter of 2019 it will be the largest venue between New Orleans and Nashville.

"What Memphis offers is a one-stop shop, as the CVB also manages the convention center," Kern said, "and obviously a very unique amenity package. We're laden with great music history...Elvis Presley Graceland, Stax, Beale Street."

Other hotel and attraction happenings in

Memphis include a \$140 million expansion to Elvis Presley's Graceland campus and a new Bass Pro Shops at the Memphis Pyramid, including a 103-room Big Cypress wilderness-style hotel. Other attractions include the world-class Memphis Zoo and a burgeoning restaurant scene with scores of new dining venues coming on-line.

"We're continually investing in the product," Kern said. "If you haven't been to Memphis in the last two or three years there are a lot of new things to see and experience."

Jackson

Located 70 miles east of Memphis and less than 130 miles west of Nashville, Jackson, Tenn., is in an enviable position to capture business from both markets or offer the two music capitals as pre- or post-meeting options, all at a more reasonable price point than either of the two large metros.

"Our location, halfway between Nashville and Memphis, is a great thing—there's just so much going on with both Nashville and Memphis," said Lori E. Nunnery, executive director of the Jackson Tennessee CVB. "It's an exciting time in this neck of the woods, and our affordability outside of those markets makes Jackson very attractive."

The major meeting facilities in Jackson are the 2,200-seat Carl Perkins Civic Center, named in honor of the Jackson native who was one of Elvis Presley's signature guitarists, and who wrote *Blue Suede Shoes*, and a DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Jackson, with 167 guest rooms and more than 9,000 square feet of meeting space.

Like other Tennessee cities, the common thread in Jackson is music, with off-site venues such as The Legends of Tennessee Music Museum, site of the first Hard Rock Cafe in America due to Isaac Tigrett being a native Jacksonian, and Jackson's AMP at the Market amphitheater. Groups can rent out both facilities and hire music acts.

Many groups like the small college town

Continued on page 125



PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Michael Owen // Managing Partner // EventGenuity // Nashville, Tenn.

What is your background with Nashville?

I grew up in Nashville and started playing music (R&B) in high school. I then joined an entertainment agency that also was an independent record promoter for Motown and Buddah Records. I eventually moved to New England where gigs were plentiful, pay was good, and our style of music was a better fit.

What makes Nashville a good option for meetings groups?

Nashville has always been a welcoming destination for groups of all sizes, but the opening of Music City Center and thousands of hotel rooms in the downtown area either on-line or about to be are a trifecta game changer. The convention campus location—just steps from Music City's packed, popular and growing entertainment district—offers planners and attendees a wealth of options for off-site events, dine-arounds and free nights.

What are some great options for group dining in Nashville?

The explosive growth of unique and award-winning chef-driven restaurants means endless possibilities. For smaller groups,

The Southern Steak & Oyster, Deacon's New South & Etch are all great, and within reasonable walking distance of the convention center and hotels. All the new venues in the entertainment district (see below) are available for single-floor or full buyouts. They focus as much on food as they do entertainment. For city-wides and mega groups, we have partnered with multiple venues and the city to close streets and throw "Bash on Broadway" events. The Country Music Hall of Fame and Musicians Hall of Fame at Municipal Auditorium also offer unique spaces for unique guest experiences.

What are five great music venues that are good options for meetings groups?

Live music is everywhere in Nashville, so it's hard to pick just a few, but I'll try. Wildhorse Saloon is great for larger groups and perfect for buyouts that want to host celebrity acts, as their production is top-notch. We've had great feedback at FGL House (Florida Georgia Line), just two blocks from the convention center. They are suitable for a variety of music styles and are located between the Goo Goo Candy Shop and Big Machine Distillery. It

makes for a cool mini-progressive-type event. There are several brand-new or about to open celebrity-driven locations in the entertainment district, including Blake Shelton's Ole Red, Dierks Bentley's Whiskey Row, and Jason Aldean's Hicktown complex. Authentic honky-tonks include my favorite, Robert's Western World, the original, Tootsies, and Legends Corner. For Blues and R&B there's Bourbon Street Blues & Boogie Bar and B.B. King's.

What is the one place in Nashville that you always want to take your groups to?

We love the historic Ryman Auditorium. The building oozes history and the acoustics are superb. Smaller groups can dine on the stage and groups up to around 4,500 can buy-out for concerts. Also, this is not so much a place, but there's one experience that is unique to Nashville. The foundation of the music industry here is the creative class—our amazing songwriters. Award-winning hit songwriters gather "in the round" to play hits they've written for famous artists, talk about the creative process and share funny and moving stories about the inspiration for their favorite songs.

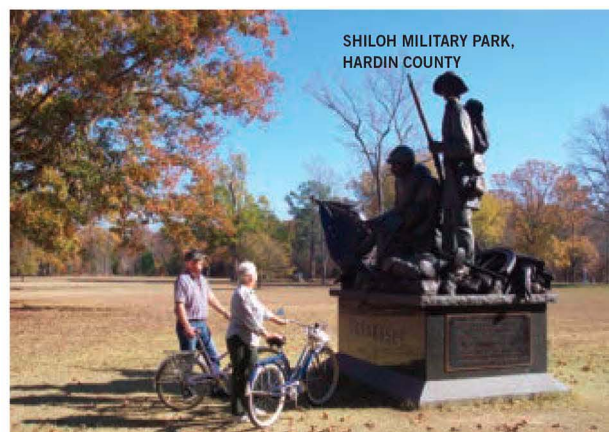
feel of Jackson, which has seven higher learning institutions and many religious colleges nearby.

"We have a downtown that is experiencing a resurgence," Nunnery said. "It's been 20 years ago that we were hit with a series of tornadoes, and the Urban Land Institute created a plan, which is really starting to come into fruition with a lot of

investment downtown."

For a truly interesting group activity, Nunnery suggests tapping into the local citizenry for a real down-home affair that will provide attendees with a truly unique experience.

We had one group come in, the Big Black Creek Historical Association, and do cemetery walks and red-back hymnal singing."



SHILOH MILITARY PARK,
HARDIN COUNTY


Nunnery said of the event, which was held in a restored church that was damaged in the Civil War. "They had a fish fry and the ladies from the church brought in the desserts...You can't always do that in a larger community but here they just throw it down for guests."

Hardin County

With its biggest city being Jackson, Hardin County is a great option for groups wanting to convene in the great outdoors in Pickwick Landing State Park and Shiloh Military Park, the site of the monumental the Civil War battle.

Pickwick offers a hotel, restaurant, cabins, campground, golf course, marina and a 6,000-square-foot convention center all on Pickwick Lake, a major recreational lake.

"They don't have to stay in the meeting room the whole time," said Beth Pippin, tourism director for Tour Hardin County, about groups meeting at Pickwick Landing, which added new cabins in the last two years and has plans to remodel the others. "All of the hotel rooms are looking out over the lake. It's a peaceful getaway halfway between Memphis and Nashville.

"A lot of conferences that come here will set up tours going to the battlefield at Shiloh, or come to downtown Savannah, which is our county seat," Pippin said. "In Savannah there's the Tennessee River Museum, a veterans park and a little park in the historic district that people like to do tours of." 

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Check out MeetingsToday.com for a story about the new group options at Elvis Presley's Graceland.