



Columbia, SC: Doing the Most for Mid-Size Meetings





TUCKER PRESCOTT EXPERIENCE COLUMBIA SC

Looking for a meeting destination with the amenities of a large city, but minus the sky-high costs, traffic and other headaches that all too often come with it?

By Maria Lenhart

Columbia, S.C., hits this sweet spot. This vibrant mid-size capital city is a place where groups will find not only affordability, walkable districts, ample parking and a warm welcome, but high-quality venues, accommodations, dining, entertainment and cultural attractions rivaling those in more populous destinations.

Columbia is not only easy to get around in, but easy to get to. Located in the heart of South Carolina, it's a convenient drive for statewide and Southeast U.S. regional meetings and even for those drawing attendees up and down the East Coast, from the Northeast to south Florida. With several major interstate highways—I-20, I-77 and I-26—running through Columbia and I-95 not far away, the city is an ideal choice for a wide range of drive-to meetings.

Air accessibility is excellent as well. Columbia Metropolitan Airport (CAE) offers over 36 daily flights from eight nonstop destinations. The airport, located within a 15-minute drive to the city center, is clean, bright and navigable with easy parking.

Personal best

Groups meeting in Columbia do not get lost in the crowd but receive personal attention throughout the event. The team at Experience Columbia SC is on hand to help meeting planners attract attendees and ensure everyone has the best possible time. Along with welcome signage at tables in hotels, meeting venues and the airport, it's not unusual for the mayor or other elected officials to be on hand to greet the group.

Blog/social media content and photos are readily available for planners to email to attendees prior to the event, getting everyone pumped up about visiting Columbia.

The many other available services from Experience Columbia SC include swag items (complimentary or for purchase), visitor guides for all attendees and expert tips on specialty tours and the best spots for board dinners, offsite receptions, spouse and kids' activities and more.

Convention stars

The crown jewel of Columbia's meeting facilities is the



state's only downtown convention center, the GBAC-accredited Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center (CMCC). Located in the Vista district, the CMCC offers 142,500 square feet of meeting space and is within walking distance of 60 restaurants, bars and nightlife options and less than a mile from 2,000 hotel rooms. The convention center's industry-leading sanitation protocols made it possible to reopen in June 2020 and safely host groups in person ever since.

Columbia's approach to providing a personal, welcoming experience for groups is embraced by the CMCC staff, experts at making guests feel engaged with the events they're attending. When a group of music educators was in the building, sheet music window clings were installed, and attendees were invited to guess on social media which songs they represented. Similarly, while hosting school librarians, the team pulled together literary quotes, made them into mirror clings and installed them in the building's bathrooms, encouraging attendees to take a mirror selfie with their favorite quote.

While convention centers aren't typically known for innovative food and beverage service, the CMCC is a notable exception. About 80 percent of the food products are sourced from within 150 miles during the spring, summer and fall growing seasons. Under the guidance of a head chef trained at high-end hotels, the center's catering team

crafts menus that reflect the style of the events while also incorporating local flavor. Superior quality plated meals are provided for 1,000-plus people and can be prepared to meet any dietary needs or restrictions.

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Recent renovations at the CMCC include new flooring in the exhibit hall, allowing the space to be utilized as an upgraded exhibit floor as well as ballroom flex space.

Among other large venues is Central Energy, which opened in 2019 in the historic BullStreet District. The former energy facility accommodates up to 500 guests for galas, auctions, weddings, meetings, concerts, luncheons and more. Roll-up garage

doors, a stage, a state-of-the-art sound system, a kitchen, exclusive catering service and ample parking are among its features.

Also, in the BullStreet District, Segra Park is a multi-use facility home to the city's minor-league baseball team, the Columbia Fireflies. In the off season, the ballpark accommodates 9,000 people for sporting events and up to 15,000 for concerts and other entertainment. Sixteen luxury suites and a 7,000-square-foot Club Lounge accommodate business meetings, receptions and more.

Hotel updates

Columbia's dynamic hotel scene features an array of properties that are either new or newly renovated. These include the city's largest downtown hotel, the Marriott

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Meeting setup at Central Energy.

Columbia, which offers 24,000 square feet of flexible meeting space and accommodates groups ranging from five attendees up to 800. The Marriott is about to complete a renovation of all 300 guest rooms and suites.

Located just steps from the convention center, the Hilton Columbia Center is recently renovated and offers six meeting rooms totaling 6,000 square feet.

The city's newest property is the Cambria Hotel Downtown Columbia, which opened in June 2022 just a few blocks from the convention center with 144 guest rooms and 1,662 square feet of meeting and event space. The pet-friendly property offers upscale amenities and is designed with inspiration drawn from Columbia's arts and cultural scene.

Hotel Trundle, opened in 2018 as Columbia's first downtown boutique property, is set to unveil its new Flutter Wing in spring 2023. Designed to offer a fusion of Airbnb and hotel experiences, the wing will feature a block of five guest rooms, including a spacious bridal suite and outdoor patio. Guests will have a private entrance and enjoy amenities such as a complimentary drink upon check-in, hot breakfast and locally roasted coffee.

The Doubletree by Hilton Columbia completed a

\$5.7 million renovation in 2019 of all 237 guest rooms, 23,000 square feet of meeting space and public areas. The updated contemporary design took inspiration from nearby Congaree National Park, evoking the natural landscape to create a sense of place and local character.

Other group-friendly choices include The Embassy Suites, which offers 18,000 square feet of meeting space and close proximity to Riverbanks Zoo and Garden and its wide array of unique venue options. Outside of the downtown area, the Marriott Delta Columbia Northeast accommodates groups of up to 250 with its 16,215 square feet of meeting space and onsite catering facilities.

Extraordinary venues

Columbia really shines when it comes to options for dining, entertainment and places to hold memorable special events.

Whether it's tried-and-true Southern comfort food, contemporary cuisine or specialties from around the globe, Columbia's restaurant scene is varied and exciting. Downtown is abundant with atmospheric group-friendly options in restaurants and private event spaces. Located in a historic building that was once an RC Cola bottling



plant, Cola's Restaurant emphasizes locally sourced ingredients and has two private dining rooms seating up to 50 people. Another choice is The Pastor's Study, which accommodates up to 99 guests for catered events in a charming 19th-century space perched above Main Street.

With Columbia laying claim to having the oldest pimento cheese recipe on record, it's not surprising that variations of this savory Southern staple are on the menu at many local restaurants. In honor of this, Experience Columbia SC offers the Pimento Cheese Passport, which holders can use at participating restaurants and bars to qualify for special prizes.

One of Columbia's most versatile offsite venues is Riverbanks Zoo and Garden, which includes Sea Lion Landing, a place where guests can have nose-to-nose encounters with sea lions and harbor seals through a giant panoramic window. The space features an amphitheater and, with the adjoining entry plaza, accommodates up to 400 guests. The zoo's many other options include Ndoki Lodge, an African-themed suite with views of forest foliage and occasional wandering denizens of the zoo.

Historic houses and gardens abound in the city, with several of them available for events from Historic Columbia. Among the treasures is the Robert Mills House and Gardens designed and named for the architect who designed the Washington Monument and other national landmarks. The expansive estate shaded by 125-year-old magnolia trees offers several secluded gardens and a charming carriage house seating up to 50 guests.

Some of the city's most atmospheric and interactive settings for special events are to be found at its downtown museums. At the South Carolina State Museum,

a range of available spaces includes the Boeing Observatory and Terrace, a dramatic setting for small dinners and receptions with views of the Columbia skyline and Congaree River. Large groups can congregate in the new glass-walled Planetarium Lobby or the expansive Main Lobby, where exposed brick, a grand wooden staircase and other architectural features honor the building's past life as the first electric cotton mill in the U.S.

With such features as a chandelier by renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly, the stunning atrium of the Columbia Museum of Art is a favorite setting for receptions for up to 400 people. The adjoining Boyd Plaza accommodates up to 1,000 people for outdoor events.

EdVenture Children's Museum is another popular choice, available for groups as large as 1,500. It includes everything from breakout rooms to interactive galleries and a 12,000-square-foot terrace accommodating a stage or dance floor and overlooking the river and Gervais Street Bridge.



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