


VisitOrlando®

Think you know Orlando?
Think again.



Orlando is a world-renowned theme park destination with massive convention space, but its sophisticated culinary and cultural offerings might surprise you.

BY BLAIR POTTER

Is Orlando one of the most iconic destinations for leisure travelers? Yes, with theme parks and myriad attractions for every interest. Is the city just as popular with meeting groups? Yes, with the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC) hosting more than 200 events between July 2020 and early 2022, one of the few U.S. destinations to successfully host so many safe events during that time.

But the city isn't resting on its laurels. The hotel offerings continue to grow, and the destination is easily accessible via Orlando International Airport (MCO), one of the busiest U.S. airports. And you may not have heard much about the city's burgeoning culinary and culture scenes—a MICHELIN Guide (also featuring Miami and Tampa) will debut this year, and the prestigious Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts recently added a new concert hall.

Orlando has also become a hub for business and innovation, with **GlobeSt.com** calling it “the poster city for corporate relocation thanks to an attractive cost of living and large talent pool” and noting that companies such as KPMG, InnovaCare Health Inc. and Sonesta International Hotels Corp. are among the latest to announce plans to expand in or move to the city. Security and aerospace company Lockheed Martin built its first plant in Orlando more than 60 years ago, opened a \$50 million research and development building in 2019 and currently employs approximately 8,000 people in the area—70% of whom are in engineering and technical positions. And in terms of innovation, there's Limbitless Solutions, which specializes in creating personalized 3D-printed prosthetic arms and donating them to children.

Orlando is also a highly inclusive destination—dating back to Gay Days in 1991—and has the accolades to prove it: named the first “City of the Year” by **GayCities.com**, named the friendliest U.S. city for LGBTQ+ travelers in 2021 by **ParkSleepFly.com** and earning a perfect score from the Human Rights Campaign’s Municipal Equality Index.

The numbers tell the story

Orlando International Airport is already among the most customer-friendly “mega airports” (according to J.D. Power rankings) and was designed as the world’s first LEED v4 airport campus (LEED v4 is a more flexible and performance-based approach to sustainability). Now, the airport is adding a South Terminal Complex (set to debut in 2022) that will offer 15 new gates and allow for an additional 10 million to 12 million annual passengers.

In 2021, the 7 million-square-foot Orange County Convention Center became the first convention center to be recertified with GBAC STAR Facility Accreditation, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining the cleanest, safest possible environment for meeting attendees. The facility hosted more than 1 million event attendees between July 2020 and December 2021.

In February 2022, Design Construction Week—featuring the combined shows of the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) and National Association of Home Builders—attracted 1,200 exhibitors and 70,000 attendees to the OCCC.

“There is no question our industry is alive and well,” says Suzie Williford, executive vice president, industry relations and chief strategy officer for NKBA. “The numbers tell the story. We were so pleased to welcome 70,000 attendees, including guests from Germany, the U.K., Spain, Italy and more.

After two long years, it was pure joy to meet people in person and get down to business with a little fun thrown in. Design and Construction Week is a leading indicator of industry strength and clearly confirms the value of in-person events.”

Hospitality abounds

New and renovated meetings hotels dot the Orlando landscape, including JW Marriott Orlando Bonnet Creek Resort & Spa, a new Walt Disney World Resort-area hotel with 50,000 square feet of meeting space; the Swan Reserve tower expansion at the

Lake Nona, which calls itself “a smart city with a soul,” with 17 square miles featuring the U.S. Tennis Association National Campus and Lake Nona Medical City, “where research facilities work together with the country’s leading hospitals and educational institutions.” The hotel’s curved-glass façade was inspired by a wavelength of energy, and each hotel visitor is intended to have “an experience elevated by technology yet grounded in wellbeing”—Dr. Deepak Chopra’s Mind-Body Zone and Spa is nearby, and the hotel’s art collection includes works from talented modern sculp-



Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort complex, which added 15,853 square feet of meeting space; a \$127 million renovation at Caribe Royale Orlando, including a new grand ballroom with 50,000 square feet; a \$20 million renovation at Hyatt Regency Orlando that included all five ballrooms and 100+ breakout rooms; and an ongoing renovation at Orlando World Center Marriott that will add 24 additional breakout rooms for a total of 450,000 square feet of event space.

At the intersection of art and hospitality is the Lake Nona Wave Hotel in

tors and well-known local creatives.

“I wanted to give the feel of island hopping, or traveling Europe by rail,” Amy Parry, who curated and designed the hotel art, told Matador. “The niches needed to look cohesive, but every one is going to have its own identity.”

Culinary credentials

Orlando has cultivated a sophisticated culinary landscape in recent years (think well beyond a cluster of chain restaurants), with celebrity chefs and restaurateurs such as Richard Blais

(Four Flamingos: A Richard Blais Florida Kitchen at Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress), Guy Fieri (Chicken Guy! at Disney Springs and in Winter Park) and Gordon Ramsay (Gordon Ramsay Fish & Chips at ICON Park) bringing their talents to town.

In the culinary world, it doesn't get much more prestigious than the James Beard Award, and the 2022 semifinalist list included five Orlando-based restaurateurs: Jason and Sue Chin of Good Salt Restaurant Group, Henry Moso of Kabooki Sushi, Evette Rahman of Sister Honey's and Rabii Saber of the Four Seasons Resort. The Orlando Weekly noted "the diversity, and immigrant roots, of this year's list of nominees. Moso is from Laos, Saber from Morocco, Rahman from Jamaica and the Chins are both of Korean descent."

Many notable F&B hot spots are conveniently located near the OCCC on International Drive, which is easily walkable unless you feel like taking a ride on the I-Ride Trolley between 8 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. daily. Some of the new options include Blake Shelton's Ole Red, featuring live music and down-home cooking at ICON Park; the upscale Knife & Spoon at The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grand Lakes, created by Chef John Tesar, a Top Chef contestant and former James Beard

Award semifinalist; and Wolfgang Puck Bar & Grill at Disney Springs.

Condé Nast Traveler recently published its list of the "21 best restaurants in Orlando, from pizza to Ethiopian cuisine," and as the title implies, it offers yet another example of the city's culinary diversity. Other highlights include Reyes Mezcaleria, "a Downtown favorite for Oaxacan food," and Capa (at the Four Seasons Resort Orlando), "a chic Spanish restaurant with sweeping views from a spacious outdoor terrace."

Craving culture?

The growth and refinement of cultural venues and offerings has kept pace with the culinary scene in Orlando, with the city's Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts—a performance venue that rivals its counterparts in major cities—recently adding the elegant Steinmetz Hall and soon adding a cabaret theater. Steinmetz Hall can achieve an N1 sound rating, which is the lowest sound level humans can detect, and the venue enhances the

HYATT REGENCY GRAND CYPRESS



Richard Blais

offerings at a center that already is home to the Orlando Ballet, Orlando Philharmonic and Opera Orlando.

Other significant cultural venues that can host events include the Orlando Museum of Art, with stunning pieces by glass sculpture artist Dale Chihuly as well as landscapes by French landscape artist Louis Dewis; Rose Garden at Harry P. Leu Gardens, adjacent to Orlando's Audubon Park Garden District; Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center of Florida; and the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, which includes the world's most comprehensive collection of works by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Cultural walking tours show visitors the city from many points of view, from CITY Unseen, a free augmented-reality app that brings murals to life, to the See Art Orlando Walking Tour, featuring eight permanent art installations. Cultural festivals also run throughout the year, from the month-long ZORA!® Festival, primarily held in one of the oldest African-American communities in the U.S., to IMMERSE, held downtown over 10 city blocks and showcasing artists from around the world.

Visit Orlando

Penny Key, CEM, meeting and trade show director for the National Wood Flooring Association, switched her meeting to Orlando from a city that was essentially closed due to COVID-19. And although making the move within a few months was nerve-wracking, she says the event turned out to be a great success.

"Our exhibitors were happy, our attendees were happy, the hotels really worked and Visit Orlando helped set up everything," she says.

Find out how Visit Orlando can help make your next event a success at www.orlandomeeting.com/meetings.

WHEN NAVIGATING TODAY'S MEETINGS, EXPERIENCE MATTERS.

Orlando is leading the way with the industry's recovery by continuing to do what we do best—hosting incredible meetings. In fact, we've hosted over 200 events since July 2020 at our award-winning Orange County Convention Center alone. And now, with Orlando's convention district having undergone some of its greatest enhancements to date, there are more new restaurants, entertainment venues and remodeled hotels within walking distance. Paired with world-famous attractions and elevated health and safety standards, there's never been a better time to meet in Orlando.

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