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# Southern California's Unique Special Events Industry

BY APRIL ORCUTT

LOS ANGELES AND ITS SURROUNDING Southern California environs—from the cliffs of Santa Barbara to the shores of San Diego—offer some of the finest venues, talent, entertainment, technology and just plain magic for almost any type of special event planners can imagine. Museums of music and art and science, golden-sand beaches, rooftop clubs with expansive views, massive convention centers, comfy mountain resorts, quirky destinations, green services, and, of course, the boundless resources of the film and television studios of Hollywood all add to the attraction.

“We have the hottest creativity in the event industry in the world right here: inspired design companies, leading-edge production facilities, major lighting and sound companies, the largest and most service-oriented rental companies, the finest event producers, and catering that brings four-star cuisine to the event industry,” says Erick Weiss, president of Honeysweet Productions, which specializes in live shows. “This is the city where you can produce magic on a wide range of budgets.”







Honeysweet Productions event at the Kodak Theatre.



Opulent Foxtail Lounge in West Hollywood.



Main room at The Kress.



Breeders' Cup event catered by Wolfgang Puck at the Hollywood Palladium.

## BUDGETS, VALUE, AND ROI

The word "budget" is very much in focus in today's economically challenged environment, along with "value" and "ROI." Weiss adds that, no matter what the event is—an intimate dinner, a film premiere or a business convention—"Corporations are looking to quantify their return-on-investment so they need their events to leave a lasting impression and generate the right kind of press. They are also linking to philanthropy in many instances, which is great for the charitable world. The trick is to keep on message for both the corporation and the charity."

To maximize the ROI, "We emphasize interaction so people are *doing*, rather than just *watching*," says Ilene Reinhart, partner in Access Destination Services, which has offices in LA, Orange County, Palm Springs and San Diego. "That keeps guests engaged and participating."

And there's lots of room for participants in a city with over 92,000 hotel rooms and suites. Downtown alone has over 6,500 rooms, and more than 1,200 additional rooms are scheduled to open by early 2010.

That's a good thing, too, because, according to Jeff Anderson of Party Pals in San Diego, "Corporations that used to go overseas are now staying within the U.S. and spending money locally. Our business is up ten-percent over last year."

## GREEN LEADERSHIP

"Green is now a given," says Erick Weiss of Honeysweet. "Everyone wants to be as green as is practical." As an example, he cites the **LA Convention Center**, which has a "very aggressive green policy," and the movie studios, which, he says are doing everything they can to green their premieres. "It's a fact of event life now, and you can count on LA to be on the leading edge of that movement."

## THE NEW DOWNTOWN

"LA is so spread out that no one used to care about Downtown," says Anderson, "but **LA Live** is transforming Downtown LA. It's an incredible center which is creating a place where people will stay at night."

**LA Live**, a \$4.5-billion, 27-acre conglomeration of dramatic venues, is indeed the new hot spot in this sunny town. Next door to both the one-million-square-foot **Los Angeles Convention Center** (1201 South Figueroa Street, LA) and the 20,000-seat **Staples Center** (1111 South Figueroa Street, LA), LA Live continues to roll out new venues, including four that just opened in December: **Club Nokia**, which can accommodate 2,000 revelers; the **Conga Room** for live performances; the **Lucky Strike Bowling Center** for 24,000-square-feet of bowling

and entertaining fun; and the showpiece 33,400-square-foot **Grammy Museum**, which salutes all types of music. The Grammy Museum offers a 200-seat theater for films, performances and interview events, and the 13,000-square-foot **Target Terrace** on its roof presents a dramatic panorama of Downtown. The 40,000-square-foot open-air **Nokia Plaza** and 7,100-seat **Nokia Theatre** opened in 2007, and the **JW Marriott** and **Ritz-Carlton** hotels, both housed in a 54-story tower, are scheduled to open early next year.

The 747-seat **Mark Taper Forum** at the **Los Angeles Music Center** (135 North Grand Avenue, LA) reopened in September after a \$30-million upgrade and update of both aesthetics and technology. The new lobby entrance is twice as large as the previous one, and a lounge with a stylish metal-ribbed dropped ceiling has been added downstairs. Other stunning on-site venues include the 2,265-seat **Walt Disney Concert Hall**, the 3,189-seat **Dorothy Chandler Pavilion**, and the 2,115-seat **Ahmanson Theatre**.

Also Downtown is the 32,000-square-foot **Sports Museum of Los Angeles** (1900 South Main Street, LA), featuring the 10,000-piece collection of businessman Gary Cypres, which opened in November. The museum showcases memorabilia from baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, golf, football and other sports with a favorite item being Babe Ruth's 1934 on-the-road uniform.

Lounges are still "tremendously in" according to Carol Rosen of Party Designs by Carol, a full-service special event company in Bel Air. "Clients want intimate spaces, or spaces that can be made intimate, like clubs." **La Fonda on Wilshire** (2501 Wilshire Boulevard, LA) is a hot new Downtown club with a Mexican kick she mentions.

Within walking distance of both LA Live and the Los Angeles Music Center is the 434-room **Kyoto Grand Hotel and Gardens** (120 South Los Angeles Street, LA—formerly the New Otani), which offers a tranquil "Zen" experience and flexible meeting spaces. Remodeling of rooms and suites will be completed in 2009. Nearby, the 68-room **O Hotel** (819 South Flower Street, LA) in the Financial District of Downtown underwent extensive renovation of its historic 1920s building—inside and out—before opening late in 2007. The 900-room **Wilshire Grand Los Angeles** (930 Wilshire Boulevard, LA) finished renovating all 50,000 square feet of its ballrooms and other meeting spaces.

## HOLLYWOOD, THE GO-TO VENUE

Hollywood may officially be a small town, but between outdoor back lots and indoor soundstages, it offers event planners potential for a setting anywhere in the world: a Paris street, a Tahitian village, a Moroccan festival, or even a wild fantasy landscape. **Universal Studios** (100 Universal City Plaza, Universal City) counts the **Globe Theatre**, the outdoor **Wild West Arena** accommodating 500 to 1,200 people, and the **Moulin Rouge** for up to 150 people among its multiple venue options. **Warner Bros. Studios** (3400 Riverside Drive, Burbank), **Paramount** (5555 Melrose Avenue, LA), **Sony Pictures Studios** (10202 West Washington Boulevard, Culver City), **Los Angeles Center Studios** (1201 West 5th Street, LA), **Sunset Gower Studios** (1438 North Gower Street, Hollywood), **Culver Studios** (9337 West Washington Boulevard, Culver City), and **Raleigh Studios** (5300 Melrose Avenue, Hollywood) present a wide variety of ever-changing event settings ranging from the playful to the dramatic.



Thematic moods and settings can be created on a smaller scale, too, according to Rosen. "To get more value for their money, many clients now want venues where the atmosphere is built in, such as a club," she says. "They can save money by renting a club rather than renting an empty room and having to supply all staff, furniture, silverware, linens, lighting and so on separately."

And Hollywood does not lack for trendy new or refurbished clubs. **The Kress** (6608 Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood) has an Art Deco exterior, a purple-and-black basement nightclub, a banquet-and-events center, and a rooftop lounge with cozy cabanas and a 360-degree view of Hollywood and Los Angeles.

**Social Hollywood** (6525 Sunset Boulevard, LA) is a club, lounge and event complex located in the former Hollywood Athletic Club, known as the "Playground to the Stars." **Citrus at Social**, a California-French restaurant that opened in February, is decorated, appropriately enough, in lime green with lemon accents, and its menu is overseen by Michel Richard, a 2007 James Beard Outstanding Chef winner.

The locale is also home to stylish hotels, like the **London West Hollywood** (1020 North San Vicente Boulevard, West Hollywood), formerly the Bel Age Hotel, which opened with 200 suites, a 3,960-square-foot ballroom (divisible) with sweeping views, and menus designed by Chef Gordon Ramsay.

The **Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel** (7000 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood) recently remodeled its meeting rooms, including the 4,386-square-foot Blossom Room, the venue for the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929.

#### MORE EVENT SITE OPTIONS

On the west side of town the **Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM)** (5905 Wilshire Boulevard, LA), part of the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)**, opened in February with 72,000 square feet of gallery space plus an 8,000-square-foot piazza. Pritzker-Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano designed the striking museum so it has one of the largest column-free galleries in the country.

The **Beverly Hilton** (9876 Wilshire Boulevard, Beverly Hills) has finished an \$80-million remodel of 569 guestrooms and suites and 60,000 square feet of indoor and outside event space.

The upscale **SLS Hotel at Beverly Hills** (465 South La Cienega Boulevard, LA) opened in November with 297 guestrooms and 13 event rooms up to 4,375 square feet. Philippe Starck designed the interiors, and award-winning chef José Andrés is in charge of four restaurants lining an indoor piazza.

Westwood's 268-room **Hotel Palomar** (10740 Wilshire Boulevard, LA), which opened in May, has over 5,000 square feet of event space and uses many green practices, including energy-efficient lighting, solar power, recycling bins in guest rooms, and organic snacks and beverages in the mini-bars.

Joie de Vivre Hospitality's 209-room **Hotel Angeleno** (170 North Church Lane, LA), just

updated over 2,500 square feet of event space as well as its penthouse-level Italian steakhouse and lounge, **West**, which has wide-open views of the city.

#### BEYOND LA

In the San Fernando Valley, the **Sportsman's Lodge** (12833 Ventura Boulevard, Studio City) has a remodeled lobby and other upgrades creating a cool, hip, retro vibe in its ten event rooms, including a ballroom accommodating 1,000 guests.

This summer the 102-acre **Terranea Resort** (6610 Palos Verdes Drive South, Rancho Palos Verdes) on the bluffs of the dramatic Palos Verdes Peninsula 25 miles south of Downtown, will open with 75,000 square feet of outdoor event space plus 60,000 square feet of indoor event space, including an 18,000-square-foot ballroom.

The other "magic" Southern California venue, **Disneyland** (1313 South Harbor Boulevard, Anaheim), opened Pixie Hollow in October and a "reawakened" walkthrough of Sleeping Beauty Castle in December.

Farther south, the 250-room **Sheraton Carlsbad Resort & Spa** (5480 Grand Pacific Drive, Carlsbad) has stunning views and 12 event spaces totaling 25,000 square feet. The \$300-million **Grand Del Mar** (5300 Grand Del Mar Court, San Diego), which opened in late 2007, offers 20,000 square feet of event space, including a 10,000-square-foot ballroom. The **Hard Rock Hotel San Diego** (207 Fifth Avenue, San Diego) opened late in 2007 with 420 rooms and 40,000 square feet of event space. The 1,190-room **Hilton San Diego Bayfront Hotel** (1 Park Boulevard, San Diego) near the San Diego Convention Center opens its doors in January. ■