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MOUNTAIN MEETINGS: SEEKING HIGHER GROUND

By Linda Hayes

Expectations just seem to be greater in the mountains. Groups that meet at destinations surrounded by peaks flocked with snow or carpeted in green naturally look upwards, a positive metaphor if ever there was one. Singular alpine venues and activities offer similar benefits. Be it a historic town, a slopeside resort or recreational breaks that challenge the body and mind, attendees will find themselves energized, inspired and ready to work for the greater good of the group. Because, in the mountains, even the biggest challenges seem possible to surmount.

Team Building on the Wild Side. Positive attitudes prevail at mountain destinations like the Smith Fork Ranch in Crawford, Colorado, deep within Gunnison National Forest. The rustic-luxury ranch's historic log buildings can house as many as 30 people for overnight stays (the ranch may be booked in its entirety), and its indoor and outdoor dining and gathering spaces are postcard-perfect.

One of the best ways to admire the surrounding scenery is by horse. The property's equestrian experience is led by ranch foreman Chris Maxon or one of his experienced wranglers, who will quickly make riders of all levels feel at home in the saddle. Planners can arrange anything from an hour-long session within the ranch arena to an all-day excursion on old Indian trails in the national forest or West Elk Wilderness. Learning the art of horsemanship as a group will boost attendees' personal confidence and their ability to engage with fellow riders.

Sharing experiences is also part of the program at the Big Cedar Lodge in Ridge-dale, Missouri, an Ozark Mountain retreat that touts itself as "America's Premier Wilderness Resort" and welcomes groups of up to 1,000. According to Whitney Underwood, the lodge's conference services manager, one of its most unique and popular activities is a pirate-themed treasure hunt on nearby Table Rock Lake.

"Groups are broken into teams and have to drive a pontoon boat on the lake searching for clues," she explained. "After they have collected all their photos and pirate gear, and have come up with a team flag and a chant, they report back to the marina where they get to show the entire group their skills. It's a very fun way to get out on the lake and still make it a team-building experience."

Hyper-local Experiences. Although meetings tend to be the main focus of groups staying at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa in Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico—its 54,000 square feet of event space can host up to 1,263 people—once outside the boardroom, attendees' attention quickly turns to exploring the striking Sandia Mountains and Rio Grande bosque (a riverside forest).

Cultural adventures that incorporate local tribal history and heritage are also popular extracurricular activities in these parts. For instance, the Hyatt's cultural

staff encourages groups to partake in seasonal Native American activities such as dancing, flute performances and bread-baking demonstrations. Also offered are jewelry-making classes in which a Navajo silversmith shares the process he uses to create stamped copper bracelets.

Another distinctly local opportunity is the Tamaya Horse Rehabilitation Program, which encourages corporate social responsibility by inviting visiting attendees to aid in the care of New Mexico's abandoned horse population, working side by side with program wranglers. Associations can even adopt a horse and receive regular updates on its progress.

Hyatt's New Mexico property isn't its only one dedicated to giving back to its home community. In Incline Village, Nevada, the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort works closely with the Sugar Pine Foundation, a local organization dedicated to saving Lake Tahoe's Sugar Pine trees by "educating and involving the community in hands-on stewardship." In the spring and fall, hotel staff can arrange trail outings and seedling plantings with foundation representatives, during which groups will learn about the importance of this initiative and its effects on the community.

It's a given that the trees are part of what makes Tahoe so appealing—a fact that's not lost on the Hyatt, where much of its 50,000 square feet of indoor-outdoor meeting spaces offers views of the forested hillsides.

Mountain Mindfulness. Getting off the beaten path is becoming a more common goal with travelers these days, and groups are no exception. An occasion to disconnect from electronics and reconnect with natural surroundings does wonders for creativity and inspires thinking outside the box.

In certain mountainous areas, this is easily accomplished in the form of hut-to-hut skiing, snowshoeing and hiking. The 10th Mountain Division Hut Asso-

MORE MOTIVATING MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCES



Snowshoe and gourmet dining excursions: At the Osprey, A RockResort in Beaver Creek, Colorado, groups are invited to participate in a variety of new snowshoe adventures, followed by decadent culinary and wine pairings at the Osprey Fireside Grill.

DJ Cat: At the Heavenly Mountain Resort in South Lake Tahoe, California, a retired grooming machine has been transformed into a custom-built mobile DJ station, complete with 52 high-output speakers. It is typically parked outside of the Tamarack Lodge but can take its tracks to various mountain locations throughout the season.

Mountain adventure courses: At the Camelback Resort in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, an outdoor team-building center features more than 100 aerial obstacles, zip lines, a mountain coaster and challenge games at ground level.

Culinary combo: The Cooking School of Aspen in Aspen, Colorado, caters to groups with private farm-to-table lunches or dinners, event space and special team-building classes that focus on cooking.

ciation, which manages 34 Colorado backcountry huts in proximity to Aspen, Vail, Crested Butte and Breckenridge, is the go-to source for adventurous groups interested in booking such an excursion. The association owns a dozen huts, all of which can accommodate at least 16 people; other huts can accommodate up to 20 people. All are outfitted with wood-burning stoves and cooking and bedding essentials.

For those interested in an East Coast backcountry experience, the Appalachian Mountain Club offers a variety of accommodations and experiences from Maine to New Jersey. From huts to more traditional lodges, there is a destination for every group and interest. Catering, AV equipment, special programming and team-building programs are available at some of its properties as well.

Purpose-built Communities. Some 120 miles southwest of Denver, in the Arkansas Riverfront town of Buena

Vista, Colorado, the burgeoning community of South Main is the perfect example of new urbanism. Designed as a pedestrian-friendly community with Victorian-style, eco-friendly mixed-use residences, a homey, low-key appeal and an emphasis on local recreation, South Main should be on the radar of state and regional associations as a future meeting destination.

The area's offerings include the 20-room Surf Chateau hotel overlooking the river, and a sister property, the Surf Hotel, is scheduled for completion in 2017. Alternately, groups can turn to a collection of 11 studio to four-bedroom homes for rent. Locally owned shops, eateries, a town square and a brewery with outdoor event space are within walking distance, as is a whitewater park regularly used by kayakers and rafters.

Association meeting planners looking to ramp up the attendee experience need only look up. There's a reason they call them peak experiences. ■