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**Desert Meetings**  
After-hours activities intrigue and cool off groups

by Tony Bartlett  
*Meetings West*, November 2006

With clear skies, stars and vast expanses, evenings have always been an integral part of the desert experience.

When the white-water rafting, hot-air ballooning and helicopter tours are done for the day—and intense meeting sessions have concluded—there are still plenty of outdoor options available for groups.

Though popular, these options extend beyond the open-air theme party, as destinations have become very creative at luring groups to unwind and recharge their batteries in nighttime desert ecosystems.

However, while desert-based CVBs all promote 300-plus days of sunshine annually and a heat that lacks humidity, the climates and terrain of the three major deserts—Sonoran, Chihuahuan and Mojave—are all very different.

**Arizona**

Greater Phoenix presides over some 400 square miles of Sonoran Desert, and encompasses communities including Scottsdale, Tempe and Mesa, as well as 200 of the Grand Canyon State's 300-plus golf courses.

"We have the perfect weather," says Janis Thomas, the Greater Phoenix CVB's associate director of conference services. "Anything you can do indoors you can mostly do outdoors in the evenings. There are both enclosed and open options year-round. Dinner on a patio is always fabulous."

She concedes that for a couple of months of the year—the low, less expensive season—it can be a little warm.

"But misting systems are common and when it gets to 60 degrees outdoors in winter there are space heaters," she says.

Thomas mentions the revitalized downtown, which in July opened phase one of the Phoenix Convention Center, with 156,000 square feet of available space, and which is ideal for art walks, pub crawls and scavenger hunts.

Activities in the desert range from pool parties to cookouts and hayrides, and major Western-theme attractions such as Corona Ranch and Rodeo Grounds. And Rawhide at Wild Horse Pass accommodates large groups.

The area also boasts a handful of lakes. At Lake Pleasant, 45 minutes from downtown Phoenix, there are day and sunset cruises aboard the 110-passenger *Desert Princess* riverboat. At Canyon Lake to the east, the 135-passenger *Dolly Steamboat* indulges the latest trend in nocturnal experiences with its periodic Dr. Sky stargazing cruises.

Stargazing and night desert tours, aided by such high-tech equipment as individual Gen III military night-vision scopes, have taken off in the desert.

Companies including Desert Storm Hummer Tours and Stellar Adventures, both based in Scottsdale, offer stargazing, night desert tours and team building (95 percent of desert wildlife moves at night, according to Desert Storm).

Scottsdale's Boulders Resort and Golden Door Spa, for example, offers night hikes; JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort and Spa, and Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale, have stargazing programs; Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort and Spa provides stargazing dinners for groups hosted by professionals from the Challenger Space Center, a Smithsonian affiliate, which also offers its own stargazing and corporate team-building programs.

Stargazing mania ex-tends to Tucson, also in the Sonoran Desert, two hours southeast of Phoenix.

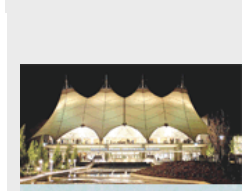
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Loews Ventana Canyon Resort, where guests receive an astronomy booklet when they check in, launched an expanded stargazing program this year that includes guided night desert hikes and Treatment Under the Stars, during which an astrologer recommends spa treatments based on a person's astrological sign.

At Tucson's Westwood Look Resort there is a nature museum and interpretative nature trails, stargazer spa rooms with outdoor hot tubs, a high-powered telescope, and binoculars for guests to use for wildlife watching.

A two-hour drive north from Phoenix is the high-desert red rock area of Sedona, surrounded by national parks. There are some 3,000 guest accommodations and the city can handle groups of up to 500.

"We have world-class properties, spectacular beauty, access to numerous outdoor sites, and lots of team building, such as ropes challenges and trout fishing tournaments," says Stephan Block, president of Sedona-based Conference Travel, a destination management company.

"What makes it extra special is that people can get immersed in nature," he says. "They get involved, which means a great deal of payoff for meetings."

Many believe Sedona, a mecca for the healing arts, is one place where the planet's energy is concentrated. A popular outdoor theme event, Block says, is the "Cosmic Vortex Party," which highlights Sedona's magical qualities, complete with New Age music and vendors including psychics and tarot card readers.

He cites another evening option that "still gives me goose bumps talking about it"—a function with a 75-piece orchestra among the red rocks and cliff formations. It begins with "America the Beautiful" as the sun goes down, continues with patriotic tunes for the second half, and big-band music and dancing for the second half.

Block has arranged it a number of times for corporate groups of up to 300 people and, he says, it's available nine months of the year, but always with a back-up indoor venue.

### California

The Sonoran Desert extends west to Palm Springs, about 270 miles from Phoenix, where the resorts of the Coachella Valley and more than 100 golf courses reside.

In September last year, the Palm Springs Convention Center opened in downtown Palm Springs. The \$34 million renovation and expansion increased available meeting space from 87,000 square feet to 154,000 square feet.

"It's gorgeous and has brought in higher-quality groups," says Bob Carey, president of PRA Destination Management Palm Springs.

Carey says there are an endless number of outdoor evening possibilities, ranging from scavenger hunts and wagon rides to dinner atop San Jacinto Peak via an aerial tramway. Events facilities, such as museums, the Corona Yacht Club, and the Empire and Eldorado polo clubs, all have outdoor components.

"You can do night golf events at all the good courses using golf balls that glow in the dark," Carey says. An example is a nighttime chipping contest held at the 18th fairway of the Indian Wells Country Club.

He adds that the area also sports opportunities for moonlight hikes, stargazing, desert tours, and even night rock climbing under close supervision.

One of the Jeep tours offered by Desert Adventures is called Twilight Adventure, which includes stops at the San Andreas Fault and an old mining camp, and which, it says, is its best tour for spotting wildlife.

### New Mexico

Situated 7,000 feet above sea level in the foothills of the Rockies, Santa Fe's tourist numbers are boosted by winter skiers.

Steve Lewis, spokesman for the Santa Fe CVB, says group evening activities in New Mexico's capital depend on the time of the year.

"Typically, there's a 30-degree swing in temperature from the day's high to the low at night, so on a 95-degree day it can be comfortable to even chilly at night," he explains.

Activities in Santa Fe include summer nighttime performances at the Santa Fe Opera, an outdoor amphitheater; outside restaurant dining; and walking and ghost tours in the city's historic districts, according to Lewis.

"Most any time of year stargazing in the foothills can be arranged, and Friday and Saturdays year-round there is a wonderful tradition of art gallery open houses," he says.

The city's primary meetings venue was the Sweeney Convention Center, which was demolished last February. At press time, work was about to start on a new \$55 million downtown convention facility on the site. Expected to open in 2008, it will increase total space from over 45,000 square feet at the Sweeney to more than 72,000 square feet. It will be situated within walking distance of 1,500 of the city's 4,000 hotel rooms.

Hotels currently have the largest meeting spaces: La Fonda on the Plaza Hotel can handle groups of up to 600; the Hilton Santa Fe Historic Plaza and Eldorado Hotel each accommodate groups of up to 500 people; the Inn and Spa at Loretto and Courtyard by Marriott both offer function space for up to 300 attendees; and the La Posada de Santa Fe Resort and Spa, and The Lodge at Santa Fe, each have space for up to 250 people.

Just 60 miles to the south, at 5,300 feet above sea level, and roughly at the northern boundary of the Chihuahuan Desert, is Albuquerque, the state's largest city.

In October, Albuquerque ended its 18-month-long, 300-year anniversary celebration. Final events were held at last month's annual International Balloon Fiesta, which at press time was expected to draw more than 700 hot-air balloons and 800,000 people over a 10-day period.

Megan Mayo, the Albuquerque CVB's communications manager, says the tricentennial gave the city great exposure.

Many, she says, are under the impression that the destination's weather is like that in Phoenix and are surprised that it actually has four distinct seasons, with daytime temperatures in the 90s during the summer and the 60s and 70s during the winter.

"If there is a possibility of snow, it's gone by midday," she says. "We have about four years round, Group

If there is a sprinkling of snow, it's gone by midday, she says. We have ghost tours year-round. Groups can view the night sky at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center while listening to Native American storytellers or be 10,000 feet closer to the stars atop the Sandia Mountains.

"There are also nighttime hikes at Petroglyph National Monument, full moon walks at the Rio Grande Nature Center, and the Los Amigos Roundup provides Southwestern-style events. The LodeStar Astronomy Center has planetarium shows and can arrange special events."

Mayo mentions that the city council recently changed zoning ordinances to allow restaurants and event facilities in historic Old Town to serve alcoholic beverages in outside function and patio areas.

The city's primary venue, the Albuquerque Convention Center, is in the midst of a \$6 million facelift. Among other new developments are the Acoma Native American tribe's Sky City Cultural Center and Haaku Museum, which opened in May. Last year, the Sandia Resort and Casino opened in December, and the 60,000-square-foot Anderson-Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum opened in October.

Moving south, 220 miles from Albuquerque at around 3,000 feet above sea level, is Las Cruces, New Mexico's second-largest city. Located in the Mesilla Valley between the Organ Mountains and the Rio Grande, it too is part of the Chihuahuan Desert, which extends south through El Paso to cover a vast area of Mexico.

According to John Bulla, convention sales manager at the Las Cruces CVB, the city has more than 350 days of sunshine per year, has more than 2,000 hotel rooms and welcomes groups of up to 1,000 attendees. The largest meeting spaces are at New Mexico State University and at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, which features 40,000 square feet of meeting space.

"We have golf year-round, hiking, bicycling, and nature walks," Bulla says. "It's perfect no matter what time of year it is. In the winter the temperature averages in the high 50s during the day."

He notes that, just like Albuquerque, if there's a light sprinkling of snow, it vanishes by midday.

Major attractions in Las Cruces include the nearby historical town of Mesilla, where Billy the Kid stood trial for murder, and to the east, the dunes of the 245-square-mile White Sands National Monument, which offers a program that includes sunset nature walks and evening star discussions.

The city's meetings hotels include the Hilton Hotel Las Cruces, the Hotel Ramada de Las Cruces and the Best Western Mesilla Valley Inn Las Cruces Hotel and Conference Center.

## **Nevada**

To the northeast of the Sonoran Desert, the terrain transforms into the Mojave Desert, usually at cooler and higher elevations.

Set in a Mojave valley is Las Vegas, with more than 133,000 hotel rooms—the most of any U.S. city. The megaresorts and casinos of the Strip, and more than 500,000 residents have found a home within the city limits.

This entertainment capital is designed to keep meeting visitors inside.

"The lure of the bright lights is strong," says Linda Davis Miyoshi, director of sales at PRA Destination Management Las Vegas.

However, she says, there are many outside evening possibilities for groups.

"We have year-round golf and you could do a golf clinic at night, and probably a tennis tournament," she says. "You could do a scavenger hunt. We've done sunset trail rides and barbecues in the evening at the Red Rock Conservation Area.

"The Las Vegas Motor Speedway has team-building options and go-carting, and there are dinner cruises on Lake Mead year-round."

Patio dining on the Strip is popular in the spring and fall. Places like the Ghost Bar at the Palms Hotel have outdoor dining, she says.

Winters, she explains, can get a little breezy, with nighttime temperatures getting down in the 40s.

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**Sedona Chamber of Commerce** 928.204.1123 [www.sedonachamber.com](http://www.sedonachamber.com)

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—Tony Bartlett has been covering the travel trade industry for more than 20 years.



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