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CALIFORNIA'S MIDSIZE CITIES
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The Gathering Spot Next Door

California's midsize cities boast opportunities for groups to gather, connect, and enjoy the Golden State's warm weather and sunshine

by **Natalie Compagno**
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Sometimes event planners and attendees want all the California Dreamin' with less of the California nightmare—population and congestion. “We have everything planners want from a West Coast destination—great weather, outdoor space, walkability, [and] incredible food and drink—but we marry that with an approachability and can-do spirit that you might expect to find in your own hometown,” says Kari Miskit, chief communications officer for Visit Sacramento.

She is speaking of the state capital, of course, but this mantra applies to any of these midsize cities throughout the West Coast.

A consistent trend for industry events is to “keep it local.” That means walking, biking, or even boating instead of driving. It means local flavors, local experiences, and local culture. Explore the car culture of Oxnard, take a mystical Indigenous-themed hike in the Coachella Valley, or salsa dance in the streets of Santa Ana. Whatever the choice, these California midsize cities deliver.



GREATER PALM SPRINGS & THE COACHELLA VALLEY

Long before Hollywood arrivals put their own spin on it, the Coachella Valley was a fertile desert oasis for the Cahuilla People, the first known inhabitants of the area who have flourished there for centuries. Today, the magic of the desert still hangs in the warm, dry air. “There’s something unique and intangible about Palm Springs,” says Darin Roper, director of business development for Palm Springs at Access Destination Services. “People’s body, mind, and spirit react to the desert. They come and fall in love with it.”

Metate Ranch Events by Desert Adventures in Palm Desert is a sprawling 800-acre ranch that provides a serene desert experience for guests, from horseback riding to Jeep tours to a re-created Cahuilla village on the site of the original Native homestead. If you’re looking for a touch of old Hollywood glamour, the Twin Palms Estate—once owned by Frank Sinatra—is a midcentury-modern property that can accommodate up to 200 guests. Or, look to the sky for more stars: The Rancho Mirage Library & Observatory can be rented for groups with a stargazing tour and a dinner under the night sky.

Greater Palm Springs is filled with unique team-building activities as well. Try Paint with Superbloom, located in Palm Springs’ Uptown District, where participants can create their own masterpieces by splattering paint at canvases. Sunny Cycle Palm Springs provides pedal-powered trolleys for 16 people and is a great way to barhop as a group.



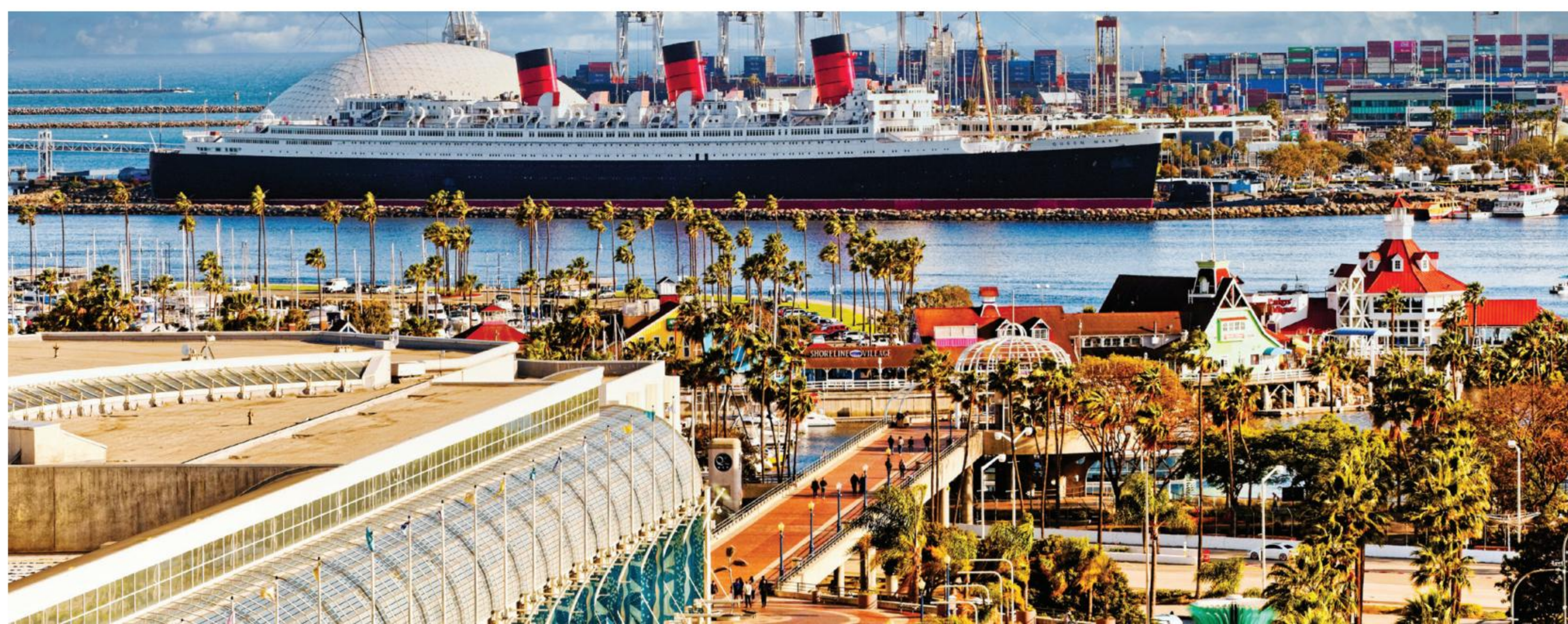
LONG BEACH

Long Beach has been the home of the Queen Mary since 1967 and the Long Beach Grand Prix since 1975. Today, LBC (an acronym for Long Beach City that locals use) has a growing reputation for its diverse culinary offerings and thriving craft beer scene.

Long Beach is an oceanfront playground with ferries to Catalina Island and a wealth of aquatic activities to choose from. Visitors can get up close and personal with penguins, and touch sharks and rays at the Aquarium of the Pacific. Team building goes next level when whale spouts and tail flukes are spotted. Harbor Cruises take groups out to spot humpback, gray, and blue whales, as well as the Queen Mary and the coastline.

Home to the largest Cambodian population in the United States, Long Beach’s Cambodia Town is filled with the flavors and aromas of authentic Khmer cuisine. The walkable Second Street in the Belmont Shore area is loaded with shopping boutiques with bars and restaurants to match. Roe Seafood is a stylish bistro that serves the fresh bounty of the local waters. Belmont Brewing Co. was the city’s first craft brewer opening in 1990, and the later opening of Beachwood Brewing in 2011 kicked off a brewery explosion in the city.

The Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center has 400,000 square feet of space and is equipped to handle events of all sizes, from intimate meetings to large-scale conventions and expos. For those looking to stay near the convention center, there are several hotels within walking distance, including the Hyatt Regency Long Beach, the Renaissance Long Beach Hotel, and The Westin Long Beach.



Above: Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley; Left: The Queen Mary on the shores of Long Beach; Opposite (top): El Encanto, a Belmond Hotel in Santa Barbara

Zachari Dunes on Mandalay Beach, Curio Collection by Hilton provides a gorgeous setting both indoor and out.



OCEANSIDE

Oceanside, as its name indicates, sits along the Pacific Ocean—so it’s no surprise that the city’s landmark feature reaches out into the sea. “The historic Oceanside Pier has served as a gathering place for visitors and the community for over 130 years,” says Leslee Gaul, CEO of Visit Oceanside. “It has the special distinction of being the longest over-water wooden pier on the West Coast, and is an ideal spot for viewing sea life, fishing, taking a leisurely stroll, watching surfers, and, of course, catching a breathtaking sunset.”

What makes Oceanside unique is its Spanish and military heritage—with the Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton neighboring the city. Off-base, the military theme can be experienced around town at places such as the Top Gun House at the Mission Pacific Hotel, which boasts memorabilia from the 1986 blockbuster, and Arcade Tattoo, a tattoo parlor that doubles as a museum of military tattoo art over the decades.

For those seeking adventure, catch a wave with surfing lessons at Oceanside Harbor. The small swells and lack of riptides make it a great place to learn. The Oceanside Museum of Art focuses on the contemporary art of Southern California and can be rented for groups of up to 250. The historic wing is an Irving Gill-designed Mission Revival National Historic Landmark.

The Rooftop Bar at Mission Pacific Hotel is a great place for an afternoon libation and provides gorgeous views of the Pacific Ocean and Oceanside Pier. For a more upscale dining experience, 333 Pacific offers an elegant setting for steak and seafood with panoramic ocean views. And for Italian cuisine and outdoor seating, Blade 1936 is a quirky spot with a rich history as the former residence of the Blade Tribune newspaper.



OXNARD

Oxnard is a gem of a beach town, known for its postcard-perfect harbor, Victorian architecture, and some of the best taquerias in the state. Oxnard recently expanded the Oxnard Taco Trail, comprised of dozens of local taquerias, restaurants, and taco trucks. Julie Mino Buffo, president and CEO of Visit Oxnard, says, “Oxnard is a vibrant city full of rich culture and history, with so much to offer groups—from delicious food and drink to engaging activities—all in a picturesque destination.”

Groups can hold events on the Scarlett Belle Paddlewheel Riverboat or check out classic and exotic automobiles at two of SoCal’s premier auto museums: Mullin Automotive Museum and The Murphy Auto Museum. For outdoor enthusiasts, there are bike and surrey rentals along the beach path, and Jet Skiing or kayaking through the Channel Islands Harbor. Ride in a Venetian gondola through the Seabridge Marina or rent a Duffy Electric Boat to explore the harbor.

A unique lodging option for groups is the new Zachari Dunes on Mandalay Beach, a Curio Collection by Hilton. As Southern California’s only all-suite beachfront resort, it provides 23,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space and sweeping ocean views.

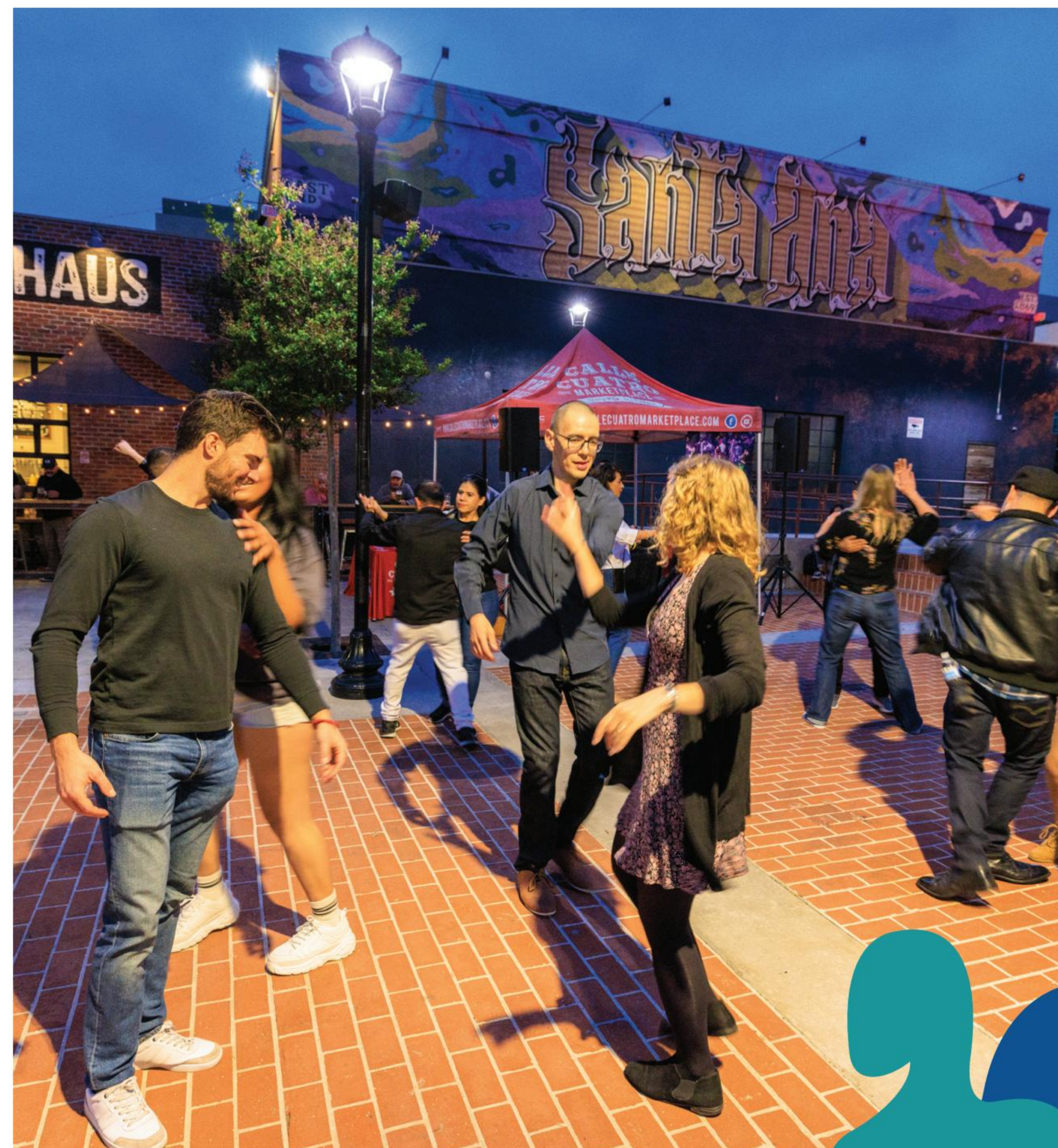


Left: The Tower Bridge spans the Sacramento River; Below: Dancing in the streets in Santa Ana

SACRAMENTO

Sacramento calls itself “America’s Farm-to-Fork Capital” with good reason. The city is surrounded by 1.5 million acres of active farmland, so groups can dine on meals made from the freshest ingredients. Sacramento’s food and drink scene is growing in prestige, with recent James Beard nominees cooking at places like Localis, Paragary’s, and Binchoyaki Izakaya Dining.

With its Mediterranean climate, Sacramento is a great outdoor city. It has more than 30 miles of paved bike trails along the scenic American River Parkway, and many hotels have bikes available for guests. SacTown Bites is a popular culinary walking tour that takes visitors on a journey through some of the city’s most exciting foodie hot spots. For fun suds and steps, the Sac Brew Boat is a pedal-powered tiki boat that lets groups of 16 cruise the Sacramento River while enjoying the local brews. With over 50 breweries in the region, groups should get their Sacramento Beer Frontier passports ready for stamps as they consume great drinks.



SANTA ANA

One of the things that makes Santa Ana so charming is its well-preserved Victorian and Craftsman architecture, which can be seen in both the French Park and Floral Park neighborhoods. The city’s downtown area—which maintains an incredible Walk Score of 99—also features art deco buildings, including the first Orange County courthouse.

The Santa Ana Train Station features conference rooms and a beautiful lobby that can be rented for events. Other venues for hire include the Lyon Air Museum, the Heritage Museum of Orange County, and The Frida Cinema—Orange County’s only nonprofit art house movie venue.

For something the team will talk about for years to come, Downtown Santa Ana’s monthly Dancing in the Streets event is a must-twirl. Top off a perfect Santa Ana visit with a stop at Cerveza Cito Brewery, where groups up to 100 can gather in the taproom boasting the iconic Mexican calavera logo.

“People’s body, mind, and spirit react to the desert. They come and fall in love with it.”

– **Darin Roper**, director of business development for Palm Springs at Access Destination Services



SANTA BARBARA

This beach-lovers' paradise is famous for its breathtaking coastal views and distinctive Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, and is a dichotomy where visitors can attend a Funk Zone Art Walk and a polo match in the same day. Santa Barbara is also a gourmet wine region with a delectable culinary scene that includes multiple farm-to-table options and local freshly caught seafood.

The Santa Barbara County Courthouse is a graceful 1929 example of Spanish-Moorish architecture surrounded by meticulously landscaped sunken gardens and can accommodate up to 200 guests. The Santa Barbara Historical Society Museum has two charming, interconnected courtyards that can accommodate up to 450 attendees, and the Hyatt Mar Monte hotel offers 10,000 square feet of ocean-view and on-the-beach venues.

Santa Barbara also has luxury options for groups looking to indulge. El Encanto, a Belmond Hotel, boasts stunning Spanish Colonial Revival design with modern amenities, while the Santa Barbara Polo & Racquet Club offers experiences that encompass the elusive world of polo. Groups can enjoy Lunch & Learns with education on the "Sport of Kings" or an immersive event such as Golf Cart Polo.



Picturesque views in Temecula Valley; Above: Mar Monte Hotel in Santa Barbara

TEMECULA

Nestled in Southern California Wine Country, Temecula is a short drive from major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, San Diego, and Orange County, making it a convenient location for visitors and companies looking for a change of pace. And with nearly 50 wineries to choose from, it's no wonder that wine tasting is the most popular group activity in the area.

Vaquero is a spectacular private resort vineyard with room for 28 guests, an infinity pool, tennis courts, putting green, and bocce and basketball courts. Perhaps the most distinctive experience is Dine in the Dark at Be Good Restaurant & Experience. Visitors are led into a pitch-black dining room by trained staff, who serve mystery dishes and encourage guests to use all their senses except for sight to enjoy the meal.

Temecula has much more to offer than wine tasting. The city is home to the Pechanga Resort Casino, where groups can savor an olive oil tasting followed by lunch in Old Town, then try their hand at glow golf in the evenings. Temecula is also well-known for hot air ballooning. Groups can levitate off the ground and work on team-building activities centered on skills like problem-solving, communication, and trust exercises. Cherise Manning, owner of Grape Escape Hot Air Balloon Adventure, extols the virtues of group ballooning. "A hot air balloon adventure is an ideal team-building activity because it literally takes your group to new heights." [m+e](#)

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