

# MeetingNews south

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February 16, 2009

## Preemptive Strike: Destination Deals

Facing recession, the region's CVBs roll out marketing campaigns and freebies

By Matt Alderton

On Jan. 11, some 3,000 meeting planners and convention execu-

tives descended upon New Orleans for the 2009 annual meeting of the Professional Con-

vention Management Association. Hotels were full and, on closing night, there was a big party at the Louisiana Superdome. By all appearances, the meetings industry was strong and the American economy was in good shape.

But appearances can be deceiving, acknowledged J. Stephen Perry, president and CEO of the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Although we're up 9.6 percent this year over last in our group bookings, the question is, how much attrition will we face because of the economy? It's too

"We do expect to be affected, there's no question about that."

—J. Stephen Perry, president & CEO, New Orleans Metro CVB

early to tell, but we do expect to be affected; there's no question about that."

While business so far remains strong, destinations throughout the region are aggressively launching programs and poli-

cies to attract group business.

In Columbia, SC, the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center has announced a "summer savings" package that has a 25-percent discount on meeting space rentals from June to August.

In Raleigh, the Greater Raleigh Convention & Visitors Bureau is marketing free museums and

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Visitors to Raleigh can travel around the downtown area gratis.

## Southern Meetings Get More Mileage with Drive-To Access

By Matt Alderton

Because his business travel budget was recently slashed, when it came time for Randy Miller to register for MeetDifferent 2009, the Feb. 7-10 conference of Meeting Professionals International in Atlanta, he wasn't sure he was going to go. But then he realized that he could drive there, and became an attendee.

"I'm driving to MPI because it's in Atlanta," said Miller, vice president of sales at Nashville's Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center, prior to the event. "If it was in the West or the Northeast, or

way down in South Florida, I wouldn't be going."

Other Gaylord officials are approaching conference attendance cautiously, too.

"I'm carpooling with a couple of other salespeople so that we can all save the airfare," Miller said.

In fact, a growing number of meeting attendees in the Southeast are taking to the roads. Motivated by low gas prices and shrinking corporate travel budgets, they're turning more to drive-to destinations that are affordable and accessible.

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Myrtle Beach's Marina Inn has picked up drive meetings.

# SOUTH REGIONAL



## South Regional, February 2009 Editorial

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## Perspectives

### The Glass Is Still Half Full

It's tough to resist stories about the economy.

It's what everyone's talking about, it's today's greatest concern, and those worries are driving all sorts of goings-on.



**Rayna Katz,  
Editor**

Such was clearly the experience of writer Matt Alderton, who put together this section.

That's the bad news. After all, the stories you're hearing (and likely experiencing) every day—of layoffs, cutbacks, and spending declines—aren't uplifting.

But the good news is our industry is finding creative ways to deal with the rough climate.

As you'll see in Matt's first cover story, "Preemptive Strike: Destination Deals," convention and visitors bureaus are coming up with enticing packages to woo groups, including some with free transportation and entertainment.

His second cover story, "Southern Meetings

Get More Mileage with Drive-To Access," talks about the increased appeal of staying local, but it also discusses decisions by meeting planners and attendees to continue to meet.

There was one blemish there though, which ties into the economy-related storm. At press time, the problem was just brewing, but by the time you read this, I fear it is already a cyclone.

That problem is meetings and incentives are getting a bad rap. After financial and insurance firms that received government bailouts planned lavish group functions, a glaring spotlight is being cast on such events.

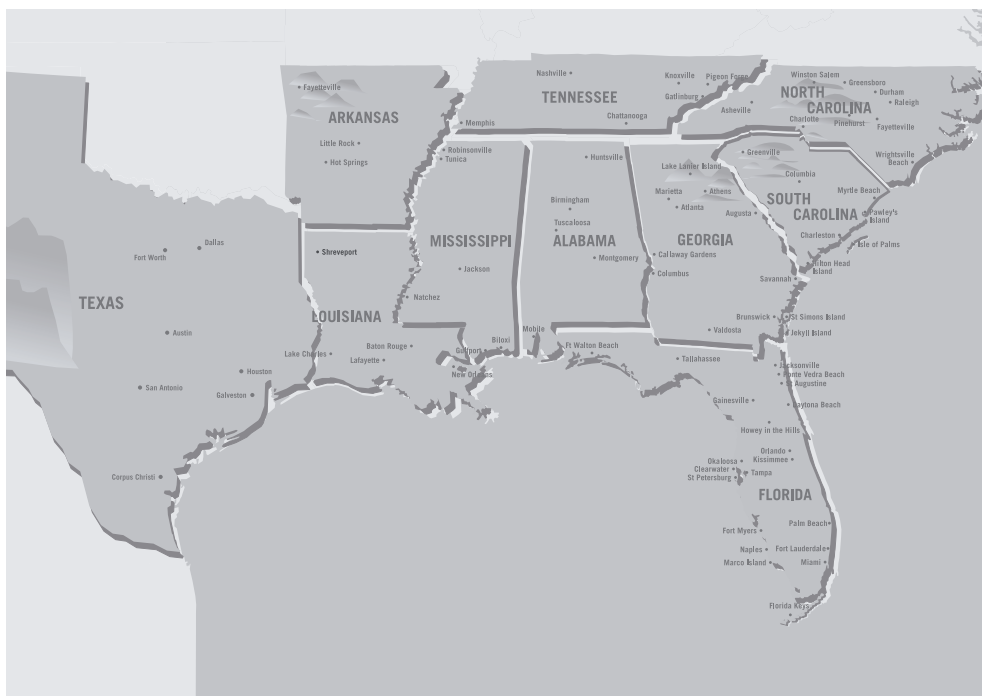
Yet, destinations throughout the South understand that the industry must go on. So Atlanta is planning to expand its convention center; Beaufort, SC, has had enough growth to create not one but two CVBs after never having one; and Hilton has set up a Southern headquarters.

Not bad for tough times. So keep on planning—there's a bright new day ahead. ■

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# SOUTH REGIONAL

## People Making News

Kimpton Hotels has tapped **Mark Fischer** to become general manager of the new 304-room Hotel Palomar Atlanta, which is slated to open this spring. Also joining the hotel's staff is Atlanta native **Alicia Junca**, who will serve as director of sales and marketing.

Located in the growing Midtown area, the Palomar will have 304 guest rooms and 10,000 sf of meeting space. Fischer will work to integrate Hotel Palomar Atlanta, Kimpton's first hotel in the market, into the Midtown community. He also will oversee all daily operations of Hotel Palomar Atlanta, bringing to life Kimpton's guest experiences, from the "Guppy Love" program that provides guests with a goldfish companion upon request, to the evening Wine Hour that offers guests a chance to indulge in the art of conversation while tasting wines from around the world.

"Hotel Palomar Atlanta will open our doors

with stylish ambience and a certain playfulness in our programs that we believe will create memorable travel experiences," said Fischer.

"We're eager to become an integral part of the Midtown community."

Part of Kimpton for over six years, Fischer most recently was general manager of the company's 112-room Onyx Hotel in Boston.

As director of sales and marketing, Junca is responsible for introducing the hotel's meeting and event spaces to clients. Previously, she was responsible for sales and marketing at Twelve Hotels & Residences, managing activities at two of the brand's Atlanta properties.

The University of Virginia Foundation, owner of the Boar's Head, a Charlottesville, VA, resort, has named industry veteran **Matthew Harris** as its new general manager. Harris has held top positions at other well-known resorts, such

as Callaway Gardens, the Homestead, and the Hershey Lodge. He has also worked with the Hilton, Ritz-Carlton, and Hyatt brands.

"We consider ourselves fortunate to have secured a leader of Matt's caliber," said Tim Rose, chief executive officer of the University of Virginia Foundation. "In each of his former positions, he's energized the organization, created excitement around strategic planning, and implemented systems that boosted performance and increased revenues." As Callaway Gardens' GM, Harris instituted a feedback system that helped the resort extend its network of relationships with meeting planners.

Going into Boar's Head with over 25 years of experience, Harris plans to apply such practices at his new home, he said.

"In my view, a high-performance organization wholly dedicated to guest satisfaction is critical to flourish in these challenging economic times," Harris said.

The 170-room Boar's Head has 22,000 sf of meeting space.



## SOUTH REGIONAL

Goodstone Inn & Estate, just outside of Middleburg, VA, has named **Star Haury** its sales and marketing manager. The property, which has 17 unique guest rooms in five different guest cottages, offers various small meeting spaces for up to 20 people.



Haury joins Goodstone from Blackberry Farm, a Walland, TN-property, where she worked her way up to group sales manager. She was welcomed to the Goodstone openly.

"I am thrilled to announce the addition of Star to our executive team," said Simon Smith, Goodstone's general manager. "She experienced significant group sales success at Blackberry Farm, and we look forward to her leadership in developing our sales and marketing program."

Leading up to her new role, Haury wore many different hats at Blackberry, including group coordinator, leisure reservationist, junior

staff accountant, and front-desk agent. Previously, she worked in management positions at Alamo Car Rental and T.G.I. Friday's U.S.A.

Goodstone, less than an hour from

Washington, DC, is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. ■

## TEXAS

### Meeting Attendees Enjoy New Ambiance at San Luis Restaurant

Meeting planners and attendees in Galveston, TX, have new-and-improved venues for wining and dining clients, as the Steakhouse as well as the Bar at the San Luis Resort, Spa & Conference Center have been modernized with new interiors.

Designed to match the Steakhouse's Gulf Coast-inspired menu, the new interiors are also intended to complement the restaurant's original color palette.

"Our goal is to match the mood of the Steakhouse and the Bar with the flair of the menus," said Steakhouse general manager John Paul.

Unveiled this month, new features inside the Steakhouse include handmade vases, glass art, and new chandeliers, as well as new seating.

The Bar, meanwhile, has been transformed with abstract art and new, contemporary furnishings, as well as a lounge area that features specialty lighting. ■

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# GEORGIA



## Despite Recession, Atlanta's GWCC Looks Forward

Officials plan to expand convention center, build new Georgia Dome

Although the recession has hurt its short-term revenue stream, the Georgia World Congress Center Authority in Atlanta has unveiled plans to improve long-term opportunities for the nation's fourth-largest convention center, the Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC).

Citing potential economic benefits and meetings industry demand, the Authority announced in December that it hopes to expand the GWCC and either renovate its stadium, the Georgia Dome, or build a new arena.

"The GWCC has a significant economic impact on the city as well as the state of Georgia," said GWCC spokeswoman Christy Petterson. "Expanding would increase our potential for this, as well as our destination appeal." While the plans do not currently include a time line or a budget, they do include five alternative

designs with which to fuel tourism and meetings in Atlanta, according to Petterson. The Georgia World Congress Center Authority is evaluating its options, and any expansion will take place "much further down the road," she said.

Each developed by Kansas City-based HOK Sport Venue Event, the five design options include the following features:

*continued on page 27*



The Georgia Dome could soon get redone—or even replaced.

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*continued from page 26*

- An expanded Georgia Dome, a new convention center and ballroom, a new exhibit hall south of the existing Georgia Dome, and renovations to Building A of the GWCC.
- A renovated Georgia Dome and a new Building A at the GWCC, which would include a new exhibit hall, a new conference center, and a new ballroom.
- A new Georgia Dome south of the existing stadium, a new exhibit hall, and a renovated Building A at the GWCC, which would include a new conference center and ballroom.
- A new Georgia Dome south of the existing stadium with a stacked exhibition center, conference center, and ballroom.
- A new Georgia Dome on the north edge of the GWCC campus, a renovated Building A at the GWCC, and a new exhibition center on the site of the current stadium.

Other major meetings destinations—including

Dallas, Phoenix, Chicago, and Las Vegas—have recently expanded, or are currently planning to expand, their convention and sports facilities. Updating the GWCC and the Georgia Dome will ensure that Atlanta remains competitive alongside those and other top-tier convention cities, Petterson said.

For the immediate future, however, she said that the GWCC is focused on opportunities

with local corporations, along with regional associations. Building officials have reported a 7 percent decline in revenues for the first six months of fiscal year 2009, which they attribute to a 7 to 20 percent drop in meeting attendance. Local and regional groups could help the facility bridge its budget gaps with short-term bookings, as well as some small-group business. ■

## GEORGIA

## TENNESSEE

### New Nashville Hotel Has Green, And High-Tech, Meeting Space

A four-star independent luxury property called the Hutton Hotel has opened in Nashville. The hotel will cater to groups with high-tech meeting needs and environmentally conscious travelers, according to general manager Steven Andre.

"When we were designing the hotel, we really wanted to combine form with function," he said of the 248-room property, which opened earlier this month with 13,600 sf of meeting space.

"We've tried to make sure that guests have

*continued on page 28*

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## A map of Tennessee highlighting major cities and interstate highways. Major cities labeled include Memphis, Jackson, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Walland, Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, Greeneville, Kingsport, and Bristol. Interstate highways shown are I-40, I-65, I-75, I-81, and US-24. An airplane icon is positioned near Nashville, indicating its role as a major airport hub.

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infrastructure within the building that gives users an open format to do anything they want to do, from a technology standpoint.”



The chic lobby of Nashville's Hutton Hotel looks as cozy as a suite living room area.

Situated in Nashville's West End, near Vanderbilt University, the Hutton Hotel has devoted its entire sixth floor to meeting space. The floor features 14-foot windows with views of downtown Nashville, a boardroom for up to 16 people, and a 7,000-sf ballroom for groups of up to 500 people.

Among other high-tech amenities in the hotel's meeting space are fiber-optic lines, lighting and sound systems, digital-touch control panels, flat-screen televisions, Internet Protocol (IP) phones, and videoconferencing equipment.

Besides its tech wizardry, the Hutton Hotel has eco-friendly features, such as guest room furniture made of sustainable materials, bamboo floors, energy-efficient LED and fluorescent lights, an on-site recycling program, and a hybrid-powered vehicle for guest use.

"In a city that is quickly being recognized by meeting planners as a tier-one destination," Andre said, "Hutton Hotel promises a stylish, elegant, and totally green experience for small groups as well as large ones."



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# TENNESSEE

## Hilton Puts Headquarters for Extended-Stay Brand in Memphis

Hilton Hotels Corp. has launched a new mid-tier, extended-stay hotel concept, "Home2 Suites by Hilton," which it said will be headquartered in Memphis along with the company's other focused-service brands—Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton Inn, Embassy Suites, and Homewood Suites.

Hilton chose Memphis because Homewood Suites, Hampton Inn, and Embassy Suites are already there, according to Bill Duncan, senior vice president of brand management for Homewood Suites and Home2 Suites by Hilton. The city also offers Hilton geographic and economic benefits because of its central location and its low cost of living, he said.

"Memphis is a geographically ideal headquarters, with nearly every portion of the United States accessible within a three-hour flight."

No Home2 Suites is planned for Memphis, but having its headquarters there will elevate the local hospitality industry, said Duncan.

"Whether the city is Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, or New York, landing the headquarters of a soon-to-be-international brand is major," he said. "We're basing five brands here because of our commitment to the city and the region."

Featuring expanded amenities and sustainable design, the new Home2 Suites brand will take a "hip and humble" approach to extended-stay, according to Duncan.

Home2 Suites developers will have the option of devoting one or two suites to boardroom-style meeting space, he said.

Construction on the first several Home2



Home2 Suites joins Hilton's focused-service lineup.

Suites properties—including properties in Charlotte and Jacksonville, NC, and in Alabaster and Gadsden, AL—is expected to begin by year end. Hilton expects to have 100 Home2 Suites properties running by 2012. ■



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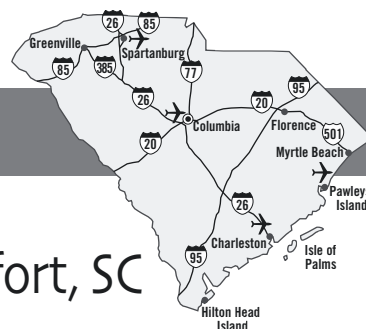
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# SOUTH CAROLINA



## Meetings Demand Spurs Two New CVBs in Beaufort, SC

The city of Beaufort, SC, which has never had an official convention and visitors bureau, now has two with which to finally court meetings and conventions, according to local tourism officials.

The first, the Beaufort-Port Royal Convention and Visitors Bureau, was created last year by local developer Dick Stewart, the former chair of the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce. He hired Elizabeth O'Brien as executive director in November, and they've been working together to make Beaufort a competitive meetings destination—for the first time in its nearly 300-year history.

"Prior to now, Beaufort always had a lot of visitors, but we didn't have a lot of meeting space," O'Brien said. That's changed recently."

Among the meeting venues that have debuted are two hotels—a 97-room Holiday Inn, with 5,400 sf of meeting space, and a 115-room Hilton Garden Inn, with 600 sf of meeting space—that can accommodate meetings of

approximately 350 and 70 attendees, respectively, according to Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce president Carlotta Ungaro.

Coupling those additions with the current rough economy, "we have a need to focus on marketing Beaufort and being competitive as a meetings destination," O'Brien said.

When Stewart independently formed the Beaufort-Port Royal Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce—the public body in charge of tourism marketing in Beaufort since 1980—decided to follow suit and formalize its role as a convention and visitors bureau.

"With the addition of more local meeting space, we decided, through the encouragement of our local business community, to make our tourism marketing efforts a little more formal," said Ungaro. "We've always been here. We're just ratcheting up our efforts."

According to Ungaro, the chamber of com-

merce will change its name this month to the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce Visitor and Convention Bureau and hire staff for a new tourism department focused on bringing in new visitors.

"We haven't been in the meetings market at all," Ungaro said. "We just want to get our foothold in it."

In the future, O'Brien hopes those hotels will be supported by a full-sized convention center that can compete with nearby destinations such as Savannah, GA, and Charleston, SC.

"We don't have a convention center yet," she said, "but we are optimistic that we will have one within the next few years. A study on where that may be is forthcoming."

Since they both want to promote Beaufort for meetings, O'Brien and Ungaro have discussed joining forces. According to O'Brien, however, those discussions were terminated recently after disagreements on funding. ■



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# NORTH CAROLINA

## Raleigh Drives Forward with Its New Taxicab Regulations

Raleigh officials soon will formalize proposed changes to taxi regulations meant to make cabs cleaner and more hospitable, said Denny Edwards, president and CEO of the Greater Raleigh Convention & Visitors Bureau. The regulations govern over 100 cab companies in the Raleigh-Durham area.

The changes, which the GRCVB submitted recently to city officials with the support of local taxi inspectors and cab companies, are part of a citywide effort to improve customer service in Raleigh's hospitality industry, Edwards said.

"From a regulation and enforcement standpoint, what we want to do is bring some consistency to our taxicabs," Edwards said. "For many visitors, their first touch point in Raleigh—where they get their first, and many times last, impression—is at the airport when they get in a cab. We want to make sure that our convention delegates have a great experience the entire time they're here."

Among other things, GRCVB's suggested regulations would require Raleigh cab companies to inspect their cars on a daily basis, allow only vehicles less than five years old on the road, enforce a minimum dress code for taxi drivers, outfit all of their taxis with GPS navigation systems, mandate that their drivers accept

credit cards from customers, and create a better record system for handling customer complaints.

"Ninety-five percent of our cabs are in great condition; this will weed out the bad apples so we can improve our visitor experience," said Edwards.

## With New Ads, Charlotte Tells Groups It's 'Got a Lot'

The Charlotte Regional Visitors Association (CRVA) has debuted five new visuals as part of its ongoing "Charlotte's got a lot" advertising campaign. The ads showcase Charlotte as a world-class destination.

"We're proud to unveil these new ads that bring to life all that the region has to offer," said Gina Sheridan, CRVA senior director of marketing and visual communications. "For potential visitors, we hope each one strikes a chord,

where they see Charlotte is for fun, kicking back, retail therapy, or cultural gems. No matter the audience, the region has a lot in store."

Among the five new "Charlotte's got a lot" visuals is one for groups and conventions: "Discover a lot." The ad reads: "Look closely at Charlotte and you'll discover a lot. A lot of gardens to tour. A lot of museums and galleries to browse. And a lot of world-class, group-friendly sites to experience along the way." ■

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## SOUTH REGIONAL

*continued from page 21*

attractions, as well as its SmartCard, a program for convention delegates.

That card grants access to deals and discounts from 150 participating restaurants, retail establishments, and golf courses.

Also, the city has started a shared-ride shuttle from Raleigh-Durham International Airport that goes downtown for half the cost of a taxi, as well as a free downtown bus that carries attendees to Raleigh restaurants and attractions. Called the circulator because it does a three-mile loop around town, the bus runs at 10- to 15-minute intervals almost all day, from 7 a.m. until 2 a.m.

In Nashville, the Nashville Convention & Visitors Bureau is taking a different approach, with its new "We'll Sing for Meetings" promotion that includes a unique incentive: a free performance by a singer-songwriter. It also includes more standard incentives like free meeting space.

"We're focusing on what makes Nashville unique—the brand of Music City," said Kay

Witt, the CVB's senior vice president of sales.

In addition to being creative, several destinations are counting on human resources to help them weather the recession.

To that end, Witt's added two salespeople to her staff in the last six months, a move echoed in New Orleans, Charlotte, and Raleigh, all of which now have bigger sales forces.

In Myrtle Beach, SC, tourism officials have recruited extra help in the form of local citizens. In a new program called "Growing with Groups," residents are being asked to generate sales leads in exchange for a two-night staycation.

"Many people in our community belong to civic organizations and national trade associations that meet regularly," said Danna Lilly,



J. Stephen Perry

director of sales for the Myrtle Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. "We're asking them to bring some of that business home."

Because word-of-mouth referrals are powerful tools, they're also a large part of sales strategies in Atlanta and New Orleans, which will host the International Association of Exhibitions and Events' annual meeting this year and next year.

By the end of this month, both cities will have hosted major meetings industry events—the Professional Convention Management Association's annual meeting in New Orleans and Meeting Professionals International's MeetDifferent in Atlanta—enabling them to engage influential audiences of meeting planners. ■

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## SOUTH REGIONAL



Even salespeople at hotels, like Gaylord's Opryland, are sticking to drive-in meetings.

*continued from page 21*

"In this economy, there's no question that the 'ability to drive' issue will be heightened when people are planning their meetings," Miller said.

And it's not just attendees fueling the drive-to trend. Meeting organizers are equally happy to keep things local, according to Dallas Teague Snider, an independent meeting planner in Birmingham, AL. One of her clients, a Mississippi-based insurance company, was recently scouting locations for a meeting this month.

After mulling sites in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda, the choice was Savannah, GA.

The decision was based on economics, but it wasn't just about minimal travel spending. It was paramount that the client made a financially responsible decision in these tough times.

"Having a place for them to drive to looks better from a PR standpoint," Snider said. "Because of AIG and others, companies don't want to be ostentatious."

That concern over image has resulted in a welcome, and sudden, increase in business in drive-to destinations, said Pamela Shelley, director of sales and marketing at the Marina Inn at Grande Dunes in Myrtle Beach, SC.

"In the last six months, we've seen an increase of 10 to 15 percent in our drive-in markets, including Atlanta, Greenville, Columbia, Raleigh, and Charlotte—anywhere from four to six hours from us," she said.

Larger destinations are also noticing an increase in drive-in traffic, and are marketing themselves more aggressively to local groups.

"We see the regional market as one that will develop this year because of the cost of cross-

country travel," said J. Stephen Perry, president and CEO of the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau. "The current

**"I'm carpooling with a couple of other salespeople so we can all save the airfare."**

—Randy Miller, VP of sales, Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center

perspective seems to be that going farther away isn't wise."

That's helping Columbia, SC, thrive, according to Ric Luber, president and CEO of Columbia's Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports & Tourism. "We have three interstates [going] through our city, and we're an hour from another two," he said. "That's working for us."

Jeff Hewitt, director of sales for the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, echoed that. "For 60 percent of the U.S. population, we are within a day's drive. What could be better for a planner who want solid registration numbers?" ■

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