# INNOVATIVE DESTINATIONS GUIDE 2022

## How Forward-Thinking Regions are Reinventing the Meeting Experience

Skift MEETINGS

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# ABOUT SKIFT MEETINGS

Skift Meetings, formerly EventMB, is defining the future of events.

As a Skift brand, we relentlessly deliver insights into the innovative business events that define organizations. Our global audience of meeting and event professionals trusts us to deliver up-to-date guidance and inspiration. Our thought-provoking, impartial content sets us apart. We take a business-focused approach that is accessible to everyone from senior leaders to aspiring students.

We are now entering a new era of business. An era where meetings, events, technology and travel all play leading roles in defining and instilling organizational – and indeed industry – culture. Skift Meetings is at the forefront of this new era, defining the way forward and helping you find new ways to thrive, regardless of the challenges that lie ahead.

# INTRODUCTION

After two years of virtual gatherings, attendees and exhibitors are ready to travel again. Data from the U.S. Travel Association shows that 84 percent of business travelers will take at least one trip to participate in a conference, event, or convention in the next four months.

However, this audience is looking for more than a return to what they used to know. The pandemic has given every professional a chance to reevaluate the way they used to spend their time and their money. Event planners need to sell the advantages of the in-person experience against the convenience of remote participation, particularly in the context of higher travel costs and unpredictable entry requirements. Instead of planning the same programs in the same hotels using the same technology, the post-lockdown wave of events must remind participants that being there in person offers the chance to experience the world anew — providing a level of immersion that's exponentially more valuable and transformative than interacting solely via a screen.

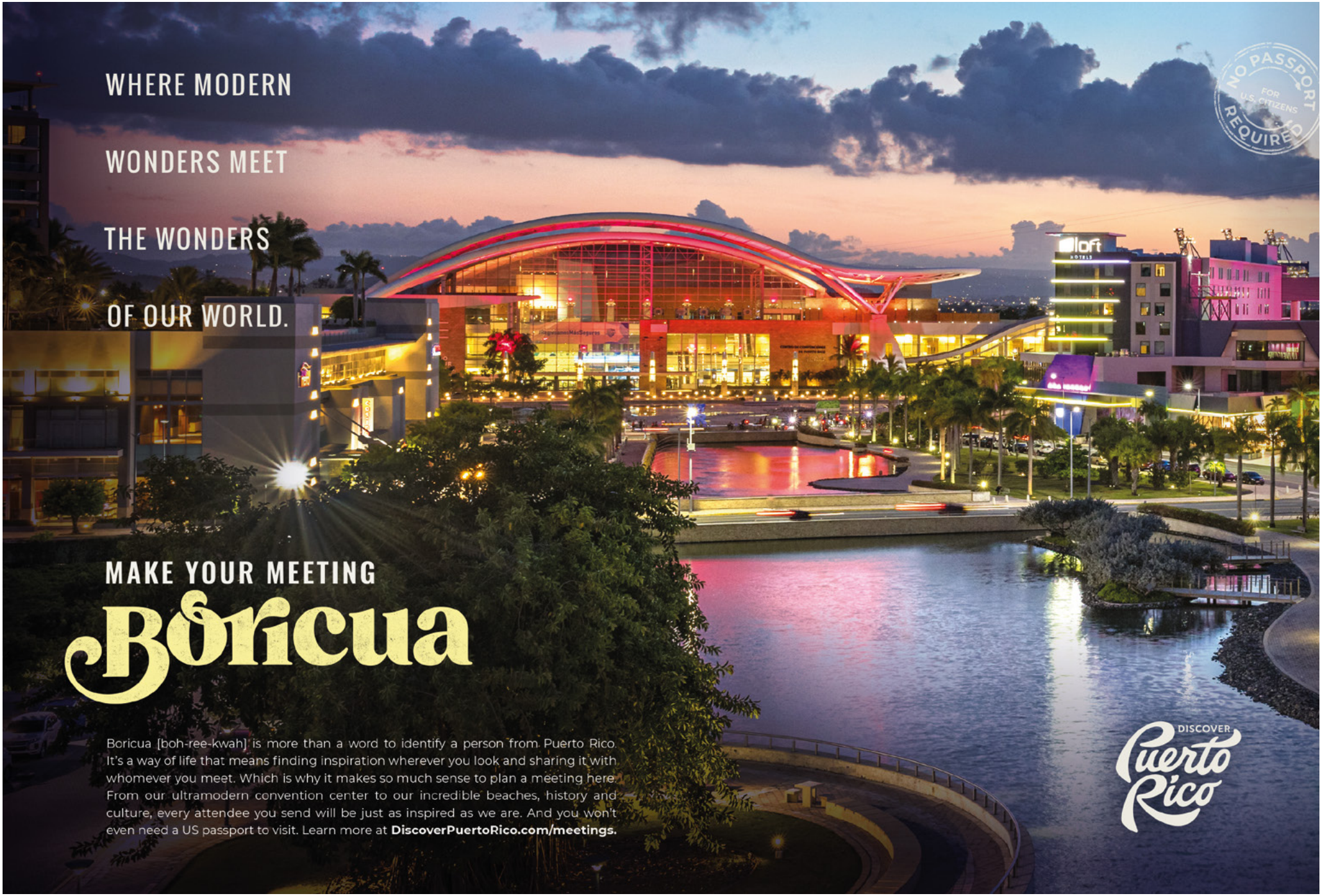
It's not just about what's happening inside the venue or what's on the meeting agenda, either. As attendees look forward to new opportunities to experience the sights, sounds, and tastes of a destination, event organizers will be focused on selecting the places where vibrant culture and a rich sense of community thrive in every corner.

With that in mind, where you host your next meeting has never been more important. During the extended hiatus from exploring the world, your audience has been hearing plenty about the excitement that awaits in the metaverse. Now, it's up to your event team to identify the location in the real universe where your audience will feel on the cutting edge of the future.

In the past, many destinations continued to focus on the standard pieces of planning a meeting — highlighting local venues based on their total number of breakout rooms, square footage, floor plans, and room rates. Today, though, we're seeing a shift, and forward-thinking destinations are putting the most essential ingredient of

impactful events at the top of their priority lists: innovation. As you search for the right place for your next gathering, count on Skift Meetings' Innovative Destinations Guide to identify the creative places around the world where you will find the keys to elevate your event experience. These standout attractions include unique venues, state-of-art technology, authentic cultural programming, groundbreaking transportation infrastructure, and environmentally-friendly initiatives. In this report, you'll get a closer look at how CVBs, leading convention centers, and local government officials are employing best-in-class strategies to attract more meeting attendees while creating far-reaching benefits for the residents who call these destinations home. It's innovation with a real purpose: to make a big impact on the attendee experience, fuel the local economy, and bring sustainability and social responsibility to the fore.

AD


WHERE MODERN
WONDERS MEET
THE WONDERS
OF OUR WORLD.
NO PASSPORT REQUIRED
FOR U.S. CITIZENS
loft
MAKE YOUR MEETING
Boricua
Boricua [boh-ree-kwah] is more than a word to identify a person from Puerto Rico. It's a way of life that means finding inspiration wherever you look and sharing it with whomever you meet. Which is why it makes so much sense to plan a meeting here. From our ultramodern convention center to our incredible beaches, history and culture, every attendee you send will be just as inspired as we are. And you won't even need a US passport to visit. Learn more at DiscoverPuertoRico.com/meetings.
DISCOVER
Puerto Rico

# NEXT-GENERATION TECHNOLOGY

## PUTTING NEW TOOLS TO WORK

As artificial intelligence, 5G connectivity, and biometrics transform our daily lives, the high-tech movement is making major waves for how events look and feel. These destinations are well ahead of the curve, leveraging emerging technologies to revolutionize the attendee experience.

*Next-Generation Technology*

HONG KONG

# Hong Kong

## A ROBOT THAT REVOLUTIONIZES SAFETY

The Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center recently welcomed a new employee to its ranks: Captain C, a 5G-powered smart robot that offers a 360-degree 4K high-definition surveillance camera, infrared detection camera, and a smoke detection system. In addition to watching what's happening in the building, the robot can do some talking, too. If attendees aren't following social distancing recommendations or wearing masks when required, Captain C will broadcast reminders. The convention center isn't the only place where attendees might interact with robots. Some hotels in Hong Kong have also integrated AI-powered robots into their service staff to help serve food and beverages.

*Next-Generation Technology*

SINGAPORE

# Singapore

## MAKING HOLOGRAMS PART OF THE HYBRID EXPERIENCE

*Photo credit: Marina Bay Sands*

From the outside, the three connected towers of Marina Bay Sands — possibly the most-recognizable structure in the Singapore skyline — stand as a symbol of the destination's ability to innovate. Now, the venue is bringing true innovation to one of the most buzzworthy concepts in the industry — hybrid experiences — with a studio that features hologram technology. If a speaker can't make it to Singapore for the live experience, he or she can be beamed on stage for the in-person audience at the venue.

It's the kind of technology that used to feel like it could only exist in sci-fi movies. Now, it can be used by anyone who wants to host a meeting. It's not just speakers who can leverage the telepresence capabilities, either. The venue recently unveiled new opportunities for organizers to customize their digital experiences so that remote participants will be able to "meet" in places that look just like the physical resort. In other words, online participants can move through 3D replicas of the venue's in-person meeting spaces. Keep an eye on the conference center for more innovation, too: An extended reality (XR) event solution is currently in the works. (Although Marina Bay Sands has yet to release the details, XR typically involves a high level of interactivity between virtual and real-word experiences, such as with touch-responsive AR.)

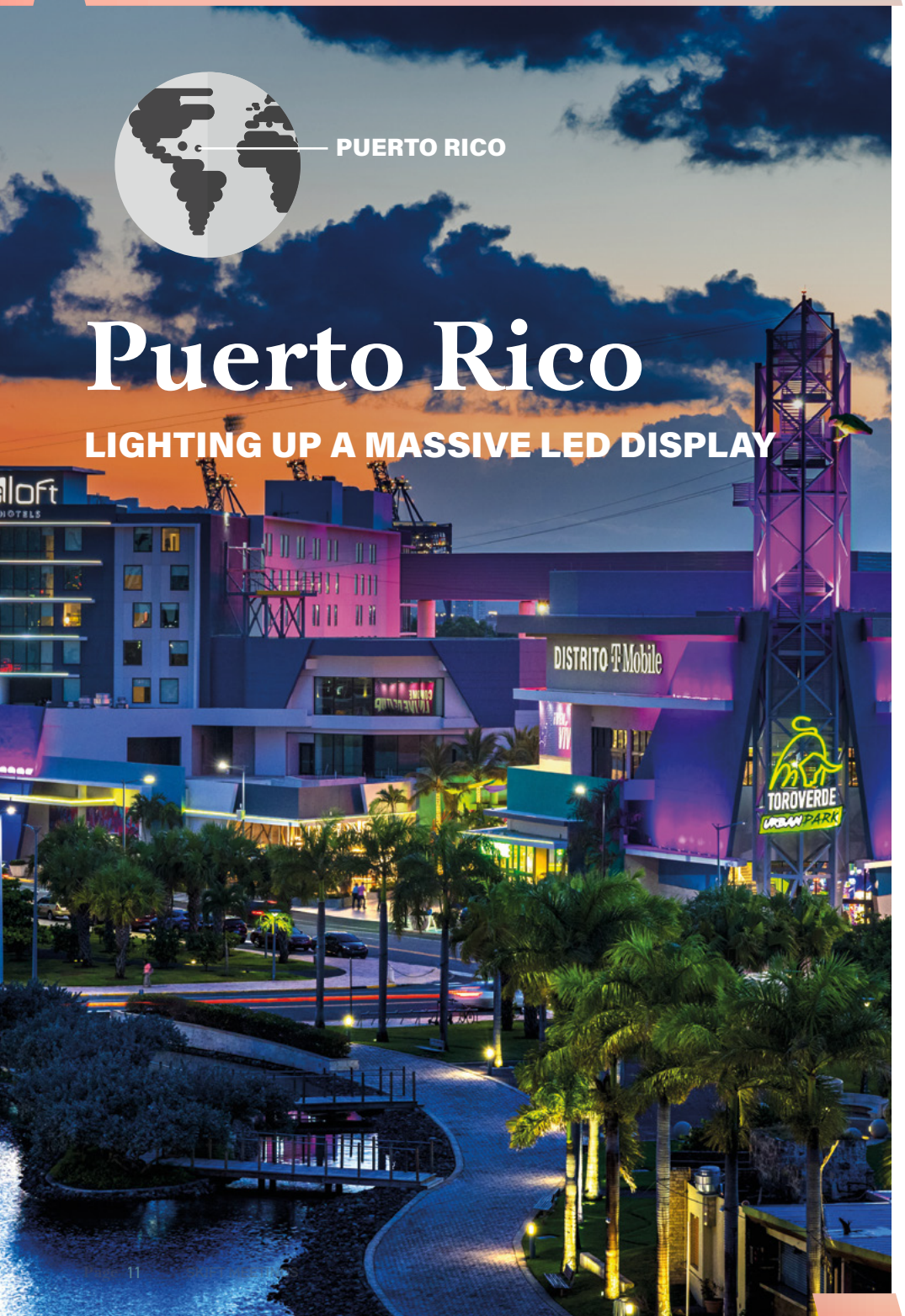
DUBAI

# Dubai, UAE

## BRINGING THE POSSIBILITIES OF 3D PRINTING TO LIFE

With the tallest building in the world (Burj Khalifa) and artificial islands off its coast, Dubai already stands out for pushing the boundaries of what humans can build. Now, the UAE metropolis is working to cement a reputation for what machines can do with a bold initiative to construct 25 percent of the city's buildings with a 3D printer by 2030. For an event industry accustomed to multi-year, multi-billion dollar renovation projects, Dubai is well on its way to delivering brand new venues and hotel facilities in record time. Additionally, not only is Dubai home to the world's first-ever 3D-printed office building, but it has also cemented its position as a hub of global innovation with its showcase of 3D printing technologies at Expo Dubai 2020. For example, the Spanish pavilion's Forest of Intelligence exhibition featured 3D-printed trees made from a combination of bioplastics and a patented material that absorbs greenhouse gasses.

*Next-Generation Technology*




PUERTO RICO

# Puerto Rico

## LIGHTING UP A MASSIVE LED DISPLAY

While the event industry was dark throughout much of the pandemic, Puerto Rico was preparing to welcome attendees back with a dazzling display of lights. DISTRITO T-Mobile, the island's newest event space that opened in the summer of 2021, features more than 14,000 square feet of LED displays and more than 19 million pixels — including the largest 4K horizontal LED screen in the Americas. Situated in close proximity to the Puerto Rico Convention Center, those screens have already served as a 360-degree immersive experience for events like the Miss World Pageant, Connect Spring Marketplace, and the North American Travel Journalists Association.

*Next-Generation Technology*



SAN DIEGO, CA

# San Diego, California

## STANDING FACE-TO-FACE WITH FACIAL RECOGNITION

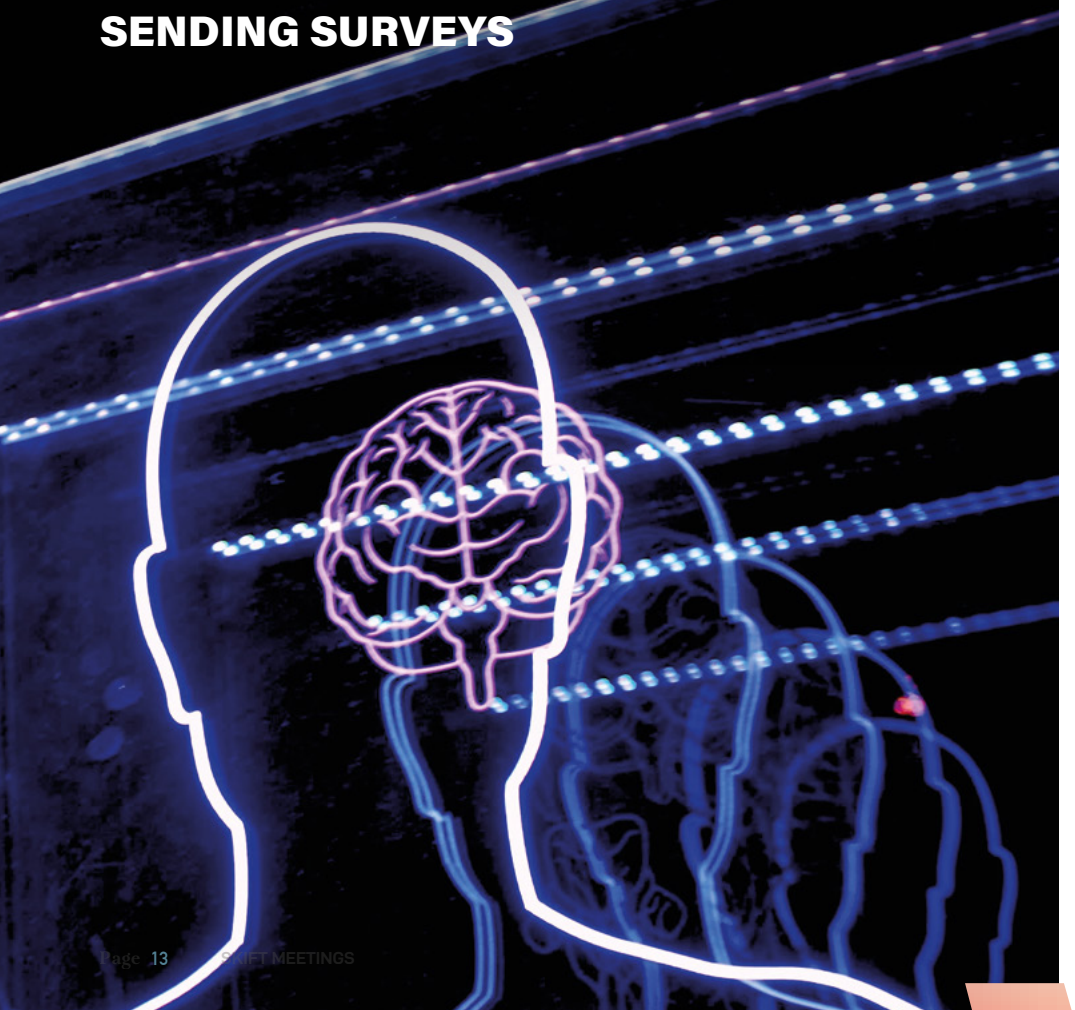
You use it to get into your phone, so why not use it to get into your event? At San Diego's Pechanga Arena, a facial verification network will allow attendees to enter the venue and complete purchases with pre-established payment information. It's a purely opt-in arrangement — attendees can stick to the tried-and-true QR code on their smartphones if they prefer — but it's a sign of what's to come in other ASM Global venues. Facial recognition has been widely used in China, but it's unclear if the concept will be able to overcome privacy concerns elsewhere in the world. Will attendees want their faces tied to personalized food and beverage recommendations? Time will have to tell — and the question itself may be a signal that innovation can sometimes overstep its boundaries. Nevertheless, it's safe to expect venues outside of San Diego to test the frictionless entry option.

*Next-Generation Technology*

MONTRÉAL

# Montréal, Canada

## ANALYZING BIOSIGNALS INSTEAD OF SENDING SURVEYS



Why wait for a post-event survey when attendees have forgotten parts of the experience? To measure real-time engagement, RE-AK Technologies recently ran a **pilot program** at the Palais des congrès de Montréal that outfitted participants with equipment to measure brain waves, heart rate, and facial muscle recognition – all the signals that indicate whether a program is making participants excited and energetic or leaving them bored and browsing their phones for something else to do. While attendees might not be ready to give everyone access to their inner emotional states, the biometric-based approach demonstrates the potential for organizers to unlock an unprecedented level of understanding of their audiences. (One company offering a more simplified approach is Zenus, with their AI-powered facial analysis designed to measure audience sentiment.)

# TRANSFORMATIVE TRANSPORTATION

## GIVING ATTENDEES BETTER WAYS TO GET AROUND

Attendees already spend long enough getting to the destination for the event. Why make them wait in crowded shuttle bus lines or sit in long traffic jams once they arrive? The easier it is to get around a city, the more comfortable your attendees will feel about exploring their surroundings — and getting the most out of their travel. These destinations are turning the trip from point A to point B into a journey worth smiling about.

*Transformative Transportation*

LAS VEGAS, NV

# Las Vegas, Nevada

## MAKING SIN CITY BORING

*Photo credit: Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority*

While you might be unsure of Elon Musk's plans to buy Twitter or colonize Mars, you might be more encouraged by the Boring Company — another Musk business — and its progress in bringing a new form of public transit into reality. The first stage of the company's Vegas Loop is now operational, and it's located beneath the Las Vegas Convention Center. Attendees can ride in free Teslas that travel through the tunnels winding beneath the venue, with this new travel route cutting down on time spent wandering hallways and climbing escalators. The initial segment of the Vegas Loop is just 1.7 miles, but the local government has approved a 29-mile route that will take attendees from the airport to the Strip and to Allegiant Stadium. While this mode of transportation has yet to live up to its initial promise of high speeds, it is providing passengers with affordable access to electric vehicles and direct routes to top destinations.

NEW DELHI

# New Delhi, India

## DECONGESTING THE CONVENTION SITE

New Delhi ranks as the 11th-most-congested destination in the world, which has long been a challenge for attendees and exhibitors on a tight schedule trying to get to the city's Pragati Maidan convention center. Located in the heart of Delhi, the venue is in the midst of a massive $355-million-USD overhaul and expansion. In addition to modernizing the venue — the project includes adding a 7,000 square-meter (75,000 square-foot) water feature with a laser musical fountain — a major focus has been the elimination of traffic headaches. A tunnel and six underpasses are being constructed under and around the convention center, allowing a major city road to become signal-free and providing underground parking for up to 4,800 vehicles.

*Transformative Transportation*

TORONTO

# Toronto, Canada

## BUILDING TRANSIT PASSES INTO THE ATTENDEE EXPERIENCE

Innovation doesn't always mean building something brand new that could be part of a sci-fi movie. In fact, when it comes to moving around a convention destination, it can be as simple as Toronto's Convention Pass. The program, offered exclusively to organizers of conferences and trade shows, offers affordable bulk sales for one-, two- and three-day passes for unlimited use of the city's transit system. It's a simple, practical solution that can make a meaningful difference to an attendee's budget and the environment. Plus, passes can be customized with an event's logo and branding — anytime an attendee shows their pass, it's a good chance to remind them that they didn't have to pay for a car. Toronto isn't alone in the convention pass offering, either. Other cities — Bremen in Northern Germany and Copenhagen, for example — have programs that allow participants to link their conference badges directly to a transit account: one piece of paper with unlimited places to go.

*Transformative Transportation*

TIROL

# Tirol, Austria

## PEDALING TO THE PROGRAM

When most people think of getting to and from a conference, the first thought isn't sweating it out on a bicycle. However, the convention team in Tirol — located in the Alps in Austria — encourages attendees to take advantage of the opportunity to reserve bikes two weeks in advance and use those two wheels for their main form of transit. Remember all those step-counting challenges that have taken hold at conferences in recent years? This kind of rigorous mountain biking is on another level.

# INCLUSIVITY

## SHAPING A MORE WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Events don't matter if attendees don't feel comfortable. Greater accessibility has long been cited as one of the top advantages of going virtual, but in-person events can also provide a more inclusive and welcoming environment with the right planning. As organizers work to make sure that every participant feels respected, these destinations are doing their part to build a better sense of belonging for everyone.

*Inclusivity*

KANSAS CITY

# Overland Park, Kansas

## NURTURING NEURODIVERSE ATTENDEES

*Photo credit: Overland Park Convention Center/Amber Deery*

Conventions are loaded with action: noisy attendees, flashing screens, packed exhibit halls, and more. All that action might be part of the reason for coming — meeting new people and being part of the crowd — but it can be very overwhelming. The Overland Park Convention Center, just outside of Kansas City, has unveiled a new sensory room to help neurodiverse, autistic, and disabled participants manage the potential stress of the on-site experience. Designed by medical professionals, the room includes bean bags, visual light panels, bubble walls, and a custom tactile art installation created by an autistic artist.

*Inclusivity*

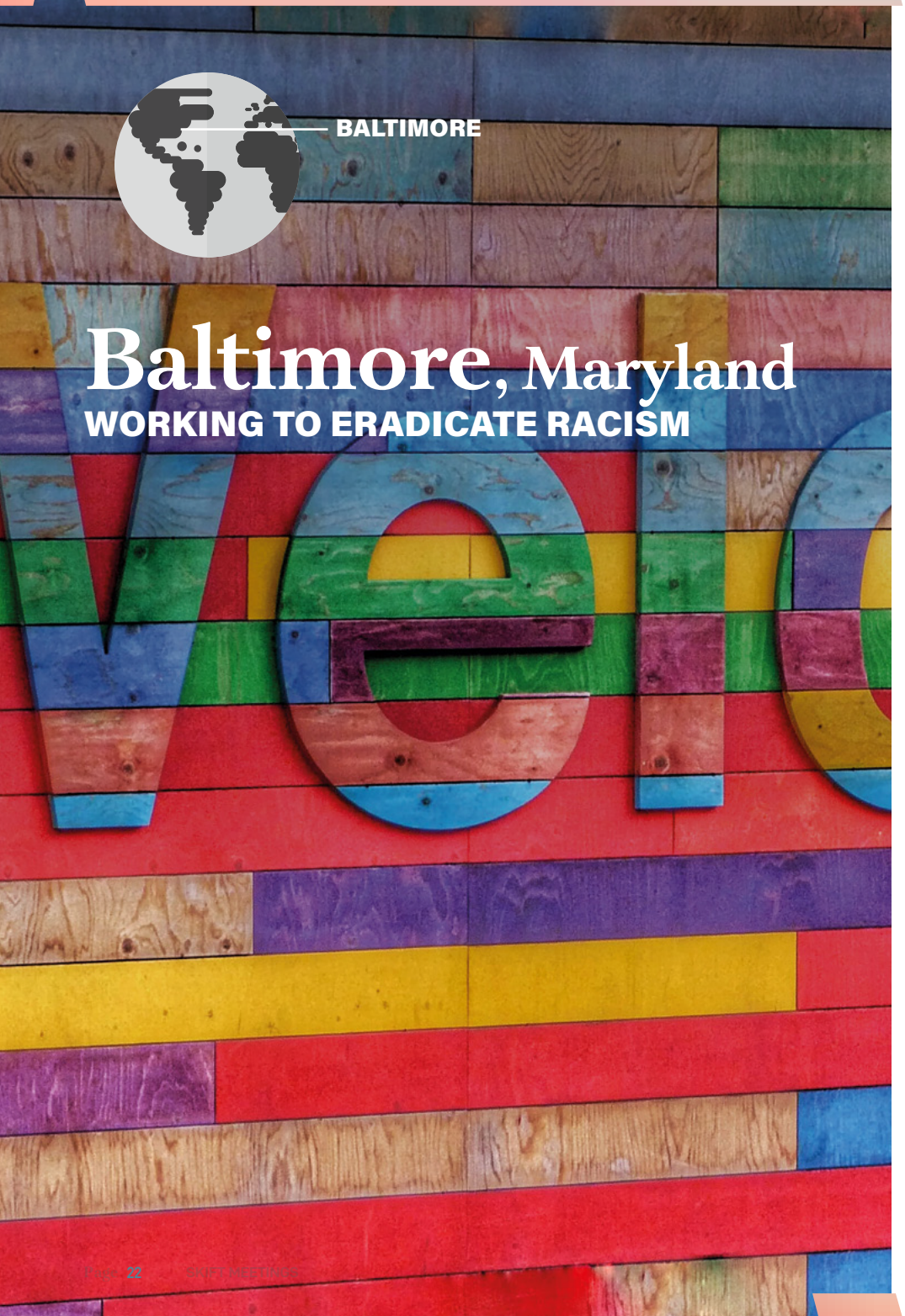
PUERTO RICO

# Puerto Rico

## LIVING OUT

Recently named the Destination of the Year for LGBTQ+ community by GayCities.com, Puerto Rico has continued to prioritize making every traveler feel right at home with a series of roundtable discussions and a new Live Out marketing campaign to help visitors celebrate their authentic selves. It's not just about who is coming to the island, though. Puerto Rico also partnered with Hospitable Me, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, Hyatt, and the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau to help provide career opportunities and resources for LGBTQ+ job seekers.

*Inclusivity*



BALTIMORE

# Baltimore, Maryland

## WORKING TO ERADICATE RACISM

Embracing the spirit of diversity doesn't happen property by property; to create a truly inclusive community, Visit Baltimore worked to engage its entire membership base. From a series of training programs for hospitality leaders in the city that kicked off in late 2020 to offering complimentary membership to minority-owned businesses, the city stands out as an example of tourism's role in combating the racism that continues to afflict American life. Now, when minority attendees and guests spend time in the city, they will be able to recognize the businesses that have taken steps to be more inclusive: Warm Welcome banners signify hotels, restaurants, and attractions that have committed to training their staff and encouraging a productive dialogue about race and bias. The Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau is taking a similarly bold approach with the recent launch of its "All Inclusive Boston" tourism campaign. Beyond featuring a diverse array of local residents proudly repeating the tagline, "This is my Boston accent," the campaign's creative powerhouse is led by a minority-owned company.

*Inclusivity*

MESA, AZ

# Mesa, Arizona

## BECOMING THE FIRST AUTISM-CERTIFIED DMO

*Photo credit: Visit Mesa*

Visit Mesa made history by becoming the first-ever autism-certified destination marketing organization, a distinction awarded by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards. Since that big announcement in 2019, the organization has worked to make the entire community a more welcoming place for the 32 million travelers with autism who hit the road each year. The IBCCES's training program — which nearly 60 businesses and attractions in Mesa have completed — is designed to simulate the world of someone who has autism and help frontline workers at hotels, restaurants, and other businesses recognize guests who may need additional assistance. Mesa also adopted the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, a lanyard and bracelet program developed in the U.K. to help those in need discreetly signal that they may require assistance or other accommodations. The city helped pave the way for wider adoption at airports around the U.S. in cities like Milwaukee, El Paso and Memphis.

*Inclusivity*

GLASGOW

# Scottish Events Campus

## PACKING A BACKPACK FOR EXTRA SENSORY PROCESSING POWER

When attendees with sensory processing challenges arrive at the Scottish Events Campus in Glasgow, they can strap on a backpack full of items designed to make the experience feel less overwhelming. The loaner packs feature fidget toys, feeling cards, and earplugs, and they help enhance the campus' efforts to make everyone manage the potential stress of a big crowd, which includes a sunflower lanyard program.

*Inclusivity*

DULUTH

# Duluth Entertainment Convention Center, Minnesota

## BRINGING ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

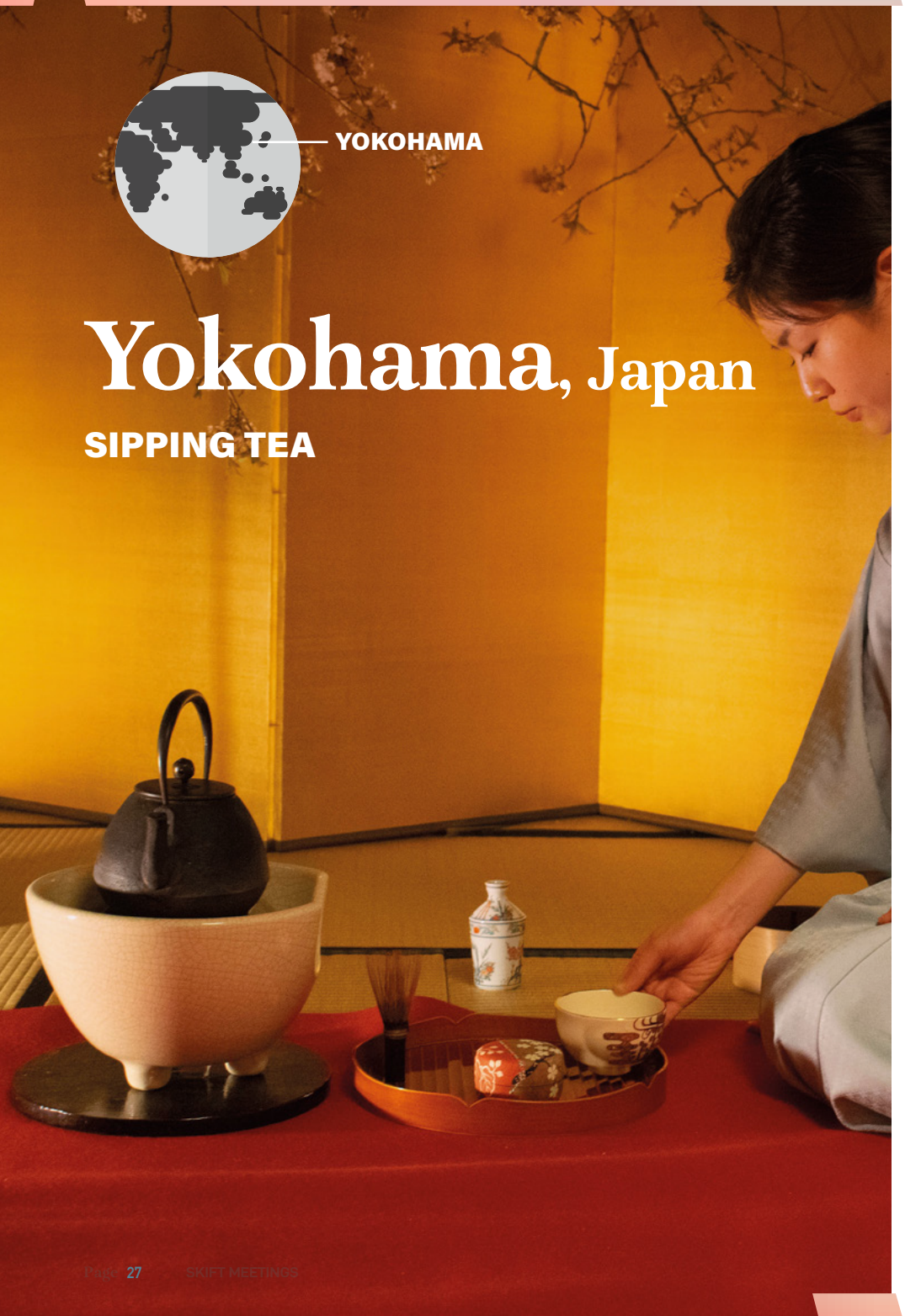
Are there new innovations helping to make those with physical disabilities feel more welcome at in-person events? Wheelchair access has been mandated for public spaces in many developed countries around the world, and an increasing number of convention centers are offering wheelchair rental services — top venues like the Javits Center in New York and ExCel in London are even providing motorized scooters to visitors. As the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center (DECC) in Minnesota shows, however, there is still progress to be made. The DECC's Symphony Hall includes both assistive listening devices and an induction loop (which transmits audio signals directly to hearing aids and cochlear implants), helping to amplify audio and cancel out background noise for those with hearing loss. The DECC also provides American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter services, as well as audio description services for those with low vision. While the DECC's accessibility services are more comprehensive than most, it is not the only facility equipped with specialized equipment for the hard of hearing. The Paris Convention Centre offers induction loop technology in its elevators and London's Congress Centre has a hearing loop system in most of its conference rooms.

# LOCAL FLAVORS

## OFFERING AUTHENTIC PROGRAMMING

Recent TripAdvisor data shows that learning about history and culture and enjoying immersive experiences are two of the top priorities for travelers today. Those activities aren't just for leisure travelers, though. B2B attendees and corporate travelers also want to feel a deeper connection to the destination than simply sitting in a plenary session or a breakout room. If they're going to make the effort to travel in a world still dealing with the fallout from Covid, they want the full experience that your host city has to offer. From including unique CSR activities to adding local experts to the educational agenda, these destinations stand out for the way they help weave the attendee experience into the fabric of the community.

*Local Flavors*



YOKOHAMA

# Yokohama, Japan

## SIPPING TEA

Forget inviting attendees to the state-of-the-art breakout room with a 5G connection that lets them wear virtual reality headsets. Yokohama Convention & Visitors Bureau offers a portable Japanese wooden tea room that can be set up in event environments. Made from carpentry styles that can be seen at teahouses and temples across the country, the program allows attendees to experience the kind of gathering environment that brought people together well before the era of QR codes, badge scans, and mobile apps.

*Local Flavors*

LOS ANGELES, CA

# Los Angeles, California

## NOT RUNNING AWAY FROM THE CITY'S STRUGGLES

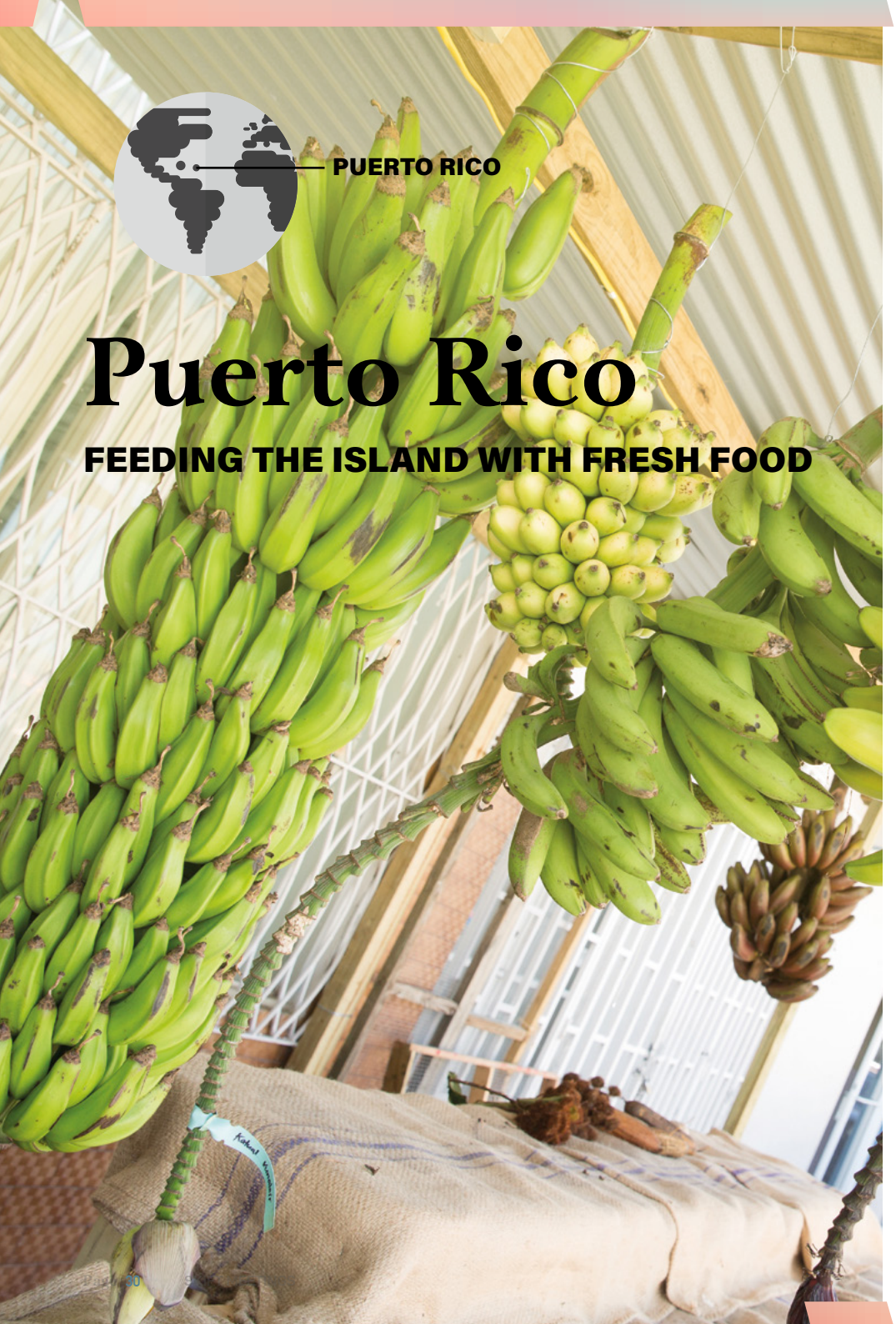
While most meetings and conferences donate money to meaningful charities in a host destination, the tourism leaders in Los Angeles are helping event organizers do more than write checks. They're helping attendees create real connections to the city's biggest challenges by inviting them to run with the Skid Row Running Club. Named for the desolate stretch of downtown Los Angeles that serves as home to many of the city's homeless, the Skid Row Running Club serves as a force of good to help former convicts and recovering addicts pursue new directions in their lives. The Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board has helped organizations like the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries and the Professional Convention Management Association host fun runs with the group. While most cities would shy away from showcasing their struggles, LA is giving some of its most marginalized citizens the chance to welcome visitors and participate with dignity in shared well-being exercises. In turn, this initiative allows attendees to find meaning that goes much deeper than a traditional conference.

CANADA

# Canada

## CAPITALIZING ON INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

For the longest time, CVBs were simply focused on getting heads in beds. In Canada, though, the focus has shifted to putting names on programs. When event organizers choose Canada for their conferences, they can receive help sourcing local expertise. The team at Destination Canada Business Events will join in the effort to curate compelling programs, identify the right academic speakers, and facilitate introductions to leaders in a host city's business community. The strategy, which focuses on seven priority sectors, is already having a big impact. The World Summit AI chose Montréal as its host destination thanks to the city's local AI community, and Saskatoon has landed events like the Protein Summit Americas and the First International Wheat Congress due to the city's rich roots in the agriculture industry.



PUERTO RICO

# Puerto Rico

## FEEDING THE ISLAND WITH FRESH FOOD

After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the World Central Kitchen decided to assess the island's food security and determined that 85 percent of supplies were imported from the mainland. To help fuel the local economy and provide locally-produced food, convention attendees can now volunteer at the World Central Kitchen's food producer network — a collection of 12 farms, fisheries, and food-related businesses. From planting and harvesting to working with animals or stringing nets, the opportunities are a chance to work with the entrepreneurs who are fueling the island's blossoming food ecosystem — and an opportunity to see where the ingredients in the booming farm-to-table movement come from.

*Local Flavors*

QUEENSTOWN

# Queenstown, New Zealand

## MAKING A LASTING EVENT FOOTPRINT

New Zealand's borders were sealed shut throughout the pandemic, but now that they are open again, Queenstown will feel a lasting impact from the convention attendees who visit — and not just through the economic boost that comes with hotel stays. The city's Queenstown Connection Program gives event organizers 16 different choices to make a meaningful contribution to the city's long-term well-being. From opportunities to help dig trails with the Queenstown Mountain Bike Club to spending time with those in need of personal support at the city's "Happiness House" resource center, the program includes plenty of ways to volunteer and feel like a member of the community.

# SUSTAINABILITY

## PUTTING THE PLANET FIRST

Floods, droughts, and wildfires — the signs of a climate crisis are all around us, and let's face it: Travel and tourism haven't exactly been first in line to help address the serious problems in the past. However, many convention centers have been moving toward renewable energy sources with rooftop solar panels, just as more and more venues are incorporating locally-sourced food into their menus. Nevertheless, the industry as a whole will need to continue innovating if true progress is to be made. These destinations are stepping up to the plate to take sustainability a step further, helping to offset the impact of travel and making attendees feel better about the decision to visit.

*Sustainability*

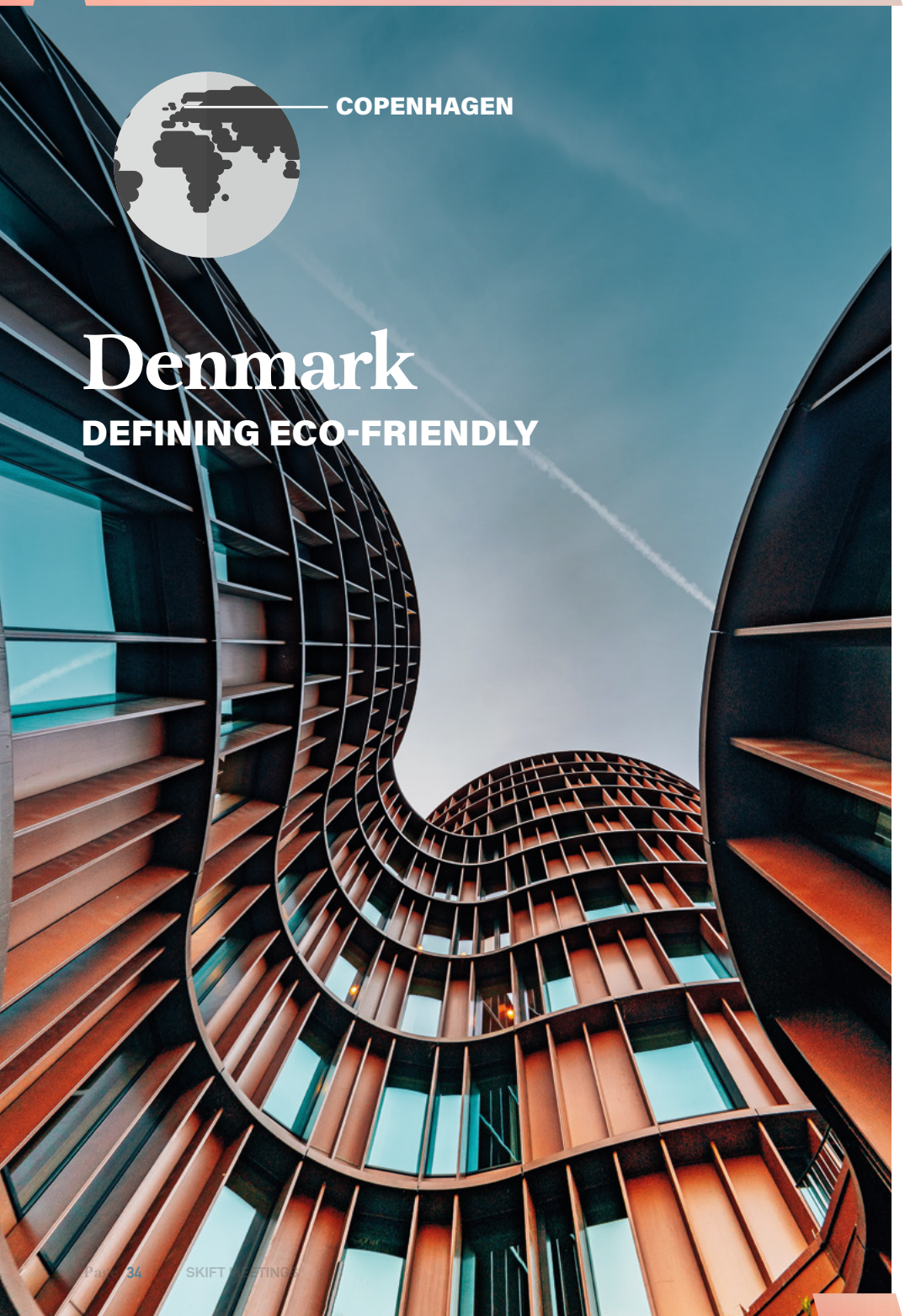
SCOTLAND

# Scotland

## SOUNDING THE ALARM

The first step to fixing any problem is admitting that there is one — and that's exactly what VisitScotland did when it became the first national tourism board to declare a climate emergency. The effort, which is coordinated by Tourism Declares, also requires an action plan for the destination to do its part in reducing emissions and paving the way toward a responsible future. It was a natural step for the country that hosted the most recent edition of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and Scotland's tourism leaders are continuing to carry the torch by putting a plan in motion to get the entire travel community in the country to step up. (One Glasgow venue is even using the body heat of visitors and staff to power thermal batteries, which can in turn be used for cooling the space.) Now, it's time for more destinations to follow suit: Only 15 other destinations have formally declared a climate emergency so far.

*Sustainability*



COPENHAGEN

# Denmark

## DEFINING ECO-FRIENDLY

Copenhagen regularly appears at the top of rankings for the most sustainable cities in the world, and the entire country of Denmark is a role model for reducing, reusing, recycling, and reevaluating how event venues can shrink their negative impacts. The Green Solution House, where bath water is reused in toilets and food waste becomes biofuel; Bella Arena's construction from upcycled Carlsberg beer kegs; and Scandic Arhaus City, where 60 percent of the food served is plant-based — the country's portfolio of facilities offers the entire industry an opportunity to understand how to go beyond easy and less-effective steps such as buying carbon offset credits.

GOTHENBURG

# Gothenburg, Sweden

## STREAMLINING LOGISTICS

*Sustainability*

With Gothenburg topping the rankings of the Global Destination Sustainability Movement Index for the past five consecutive years, it's hard to know where to begin when discussing how this city in Western Sweden is making a positive impact on the environment. While there are plenty of numbers to tout — 97 percent of the city's public transit runs on renewable energy, and 95 percent of its hotel rooms are environmentally-certified — one of the most impressive pieces of Gothenburg's approach is its focus on limiting the number of times a truck needs to come to the Swedish Exhibition and Congress Center. The venue has optimized its delivery schedule to cut the number of freight deliveries in half. And whenever something actually leaves the venue, you can bet it's not going to the landfill. Unsold food and drink at the venue are donated to the Rescue Mission to help people on the margins of society.

*Sustainability*

RIVIERA NAYARIT

# Riviera Nayarit, Mexico

## FOCUSING ON THE SMALL STEPS

Many sustainability initiatives tout big numbers with aggressive timelines. While those sound promising, plenty of them may be impossible to meet. That's why some of the initiatives led by the Riviera Nayarit CVB and the Association of Hotels and Motels of Banderas Bay stand out: Practical, simple, and easy-to-accomplish initiatives like cigarette butt collection — more than 27,000 have already been recycled — serve as a reminder that destinations have to continue to prioritize the incremental steps that might not make huge headlines. The CVB is also working to educate all travel employees on sorting waste and separating recycling counts with environmental talks and beach cleanups.

*Sustainability*

VICTORIA FALLS

# Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

## FINDING A NEW HOME FOR FOOD WASTE

As one of the seven natural wonders of the world, Victoria Falls is an ideal destination for incentive travel — after all, what's more rewarding than seeing the world's most captivating waterfall in person? However, the cascading waterfall isn't the only attraction. Every day at 1 p.m., guests see hundreds of white-backed vultures, hooded vultures, and lappet-faced vultures swoop over the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge for the leftover meat from the resort's restaurants. The animals are endangered, so the food waste program helps supplement their diets. It's emblematic of the destination's bigger commitment to sustainability, which includes upcycling projects to turn old corporate banners into bags for school children.

*Sustainability*

SYDNEY

# Sydney, Australia

## FILTERING FOR A CLEANER FUTURE

When attendees explore the waterfront while they're visiting the capital of New South Wales, they may be pleasantly surprised by just how clean the waters are: A new initiative is helping to reverse the growing problem of plastic waste in our waterways. The Australian government has taken a combat-like approach to defeating pollution, installing large filters to remove more than 16.5 tons of trash from the harbor every year. Encouragingly, the creative approach to clean-up may soon be exported to the rest of the world; Seabins, the Sydney-based company that spent more than five years on research to develop the filters and install pilot projects globally, is aiming to get 100 cities to install the bins on a more long-term basis. Sydney is currently leading the charge, with Los Angeles being the second city to sign up.

*Sustainability*

EDMONTON

# Edmonton, Canada

## MAKING MEATLESS MEALS AN EASY OPTION

*Photo credit: Edmonton Convention Centre*

As more consumers recognize the role that eating meat plays in the climate crisis, the plant-based movement is giving everyone a new avenue for their appetites to explore. While plant-based foods haven't completely caught on with group business that has historically served a different kind of chicken for what seemed like every meal, the Edmonton Convention Center is leading a shift with a plant-based **menu** that features 100 percent vegan dishes. One look at the menu — featuring items like a smoked tofu, broccoli and spinach benedict for breakfast, crispy avocado cone sandwich for lunch, and beet wellington for dinner — is a reminder that convention catering can be delicious while doing good for the environment.

# CONCLUSION

## LOOKING AHEAD TO A FUTURE FILLED WITH OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD INNOVATION

After the most challenging period in the history of travel, expect to see a tidal wave of innovation from destinations. Group business is projected to surpass pre-pandemic levels by 2024, and there will be serious competition to attract clients as destinations vie for the coveted prize of crowds that book hotel rooms, spend in restaurants, and extend their stays for additional time to explore. While affordability will continue to be a selling point, destinations cannot attract valuable business with financial incentives alone. The real way to get organizers interested and attendees excited is to invest in forward-thinking initiatives, game-changing ideas, and groundbreaking technologies.

As CVB and convention center leaders work with their local government officials to catapult their destinations into top consideration sets, it's important to note that the playing field is going to change — not just from more destinations getting serious about differentiating themselves, but from new places that are currently still in the developmental phase. From plans for oversized solar-powered sunflower umbrellas in zero-carbon, zero-waste Masdar, UAE (planned to welcome residents and convention guests by 2030) to a plant-covered forest city appropriately named Forest City in Malaysia (planned to welcome people by 2035), the development plans for new cities will offer lessons for traditional event destinations to reinvent themselves. While there are many uncertainties about how the event industry will look in a post-pandemic world, one thing feels certain: Organizers will have no shortage of places designed to inspire a new wave of creativity.

TIPS FROM AN INDUSTRY THOUGHT LEADER

# 5 WAYS TO RETHINK MEETINGS AND EVENTS

**BRAD DEAN**
CEO
Discover Puerto Rico

With over 20+ years of experience in the travel & tourism industry, Brad Dean assumed the role of CEO for Discover Puerto Rico in July 2018. Discover Puerto Rico is the island's first Destination Marketing Organization and supports the promotion of tourism to foster economic growth.

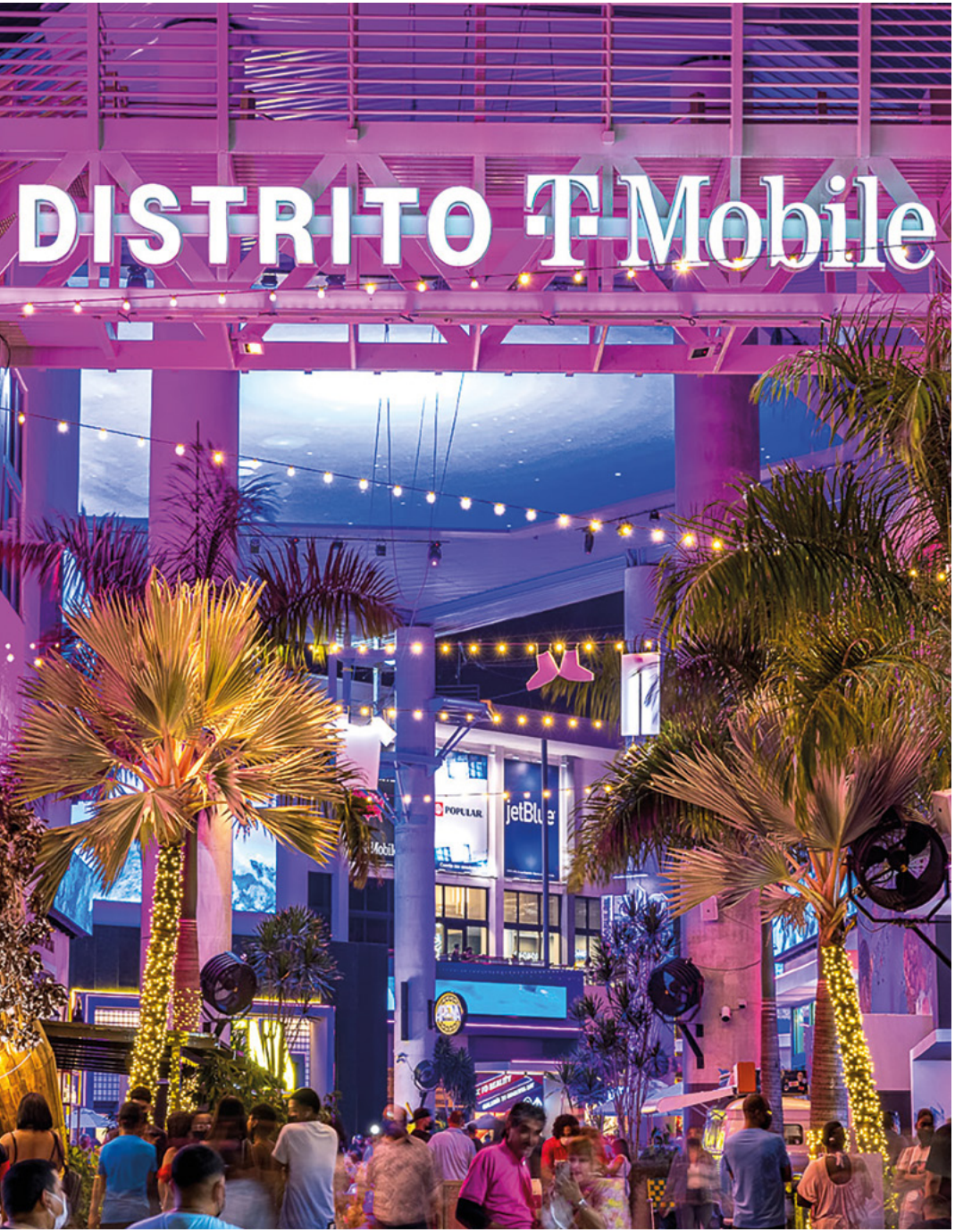
In June of 2022, we sat down with Brad to discuss the current state of meetings and events. He was able to share key insights on how destinations can help planners embrace a true spirit of innovation in all aspects of event design — including cultural experiences, technological advantages, forward-thinking diversity and inclusion policies, CSR activities, and sustainability best practices. Here are some of the top tips that emerged from that conversation.

# #1

# True Innovation Includes Cultural Experiences

As groups return to in-person events, it's important for attendees to experience the culture of a destination to help further their understanding of that destination and bring deeper meaning to an event experience – even during a business trip. That's the exciting part of Puerto Rico and what differentiates us. We believe incorporating cultural activities is a must. It creates a sense of community and bonding that translates to a natural team-building experience and makes event attendees feel welcomed. The overarching takeaway becomes more meaningful and memorable, while allowing attendees to unleash their creativity and bring forth a new energy.

We recently launched a brand campaign called 'Live Boricua,' a movement to emphasize the state of mind, way of life, spirit, flavor, style and rhythm that can only be experienced on the island. Similarly, the meetings version, "Make Your Meeting Boricua," encourages planners to "come for business, and come alive with the experience," by immersing their attendees in our unique culture, such as team-building offsites in El Yunque, the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. National Forest System, touring a coffee hacienda or rum distillery with perhaps a tasting afterward or even just a walking tour through the cobblestone streets of the 500-year-old capital city of San Juan.




5 WAYS TO RETHINK MEETINGS AND EVENTS

# #2

# Digital Screens Aren't Just for Remote Events

In terms of technology, large-scale LED screens are a great way to provide long-distance visibility, giving every event participant an incredible front-row experience from anywhere in the venue. In Puerto Rico, the newly opened Distrito T-Mobile entertainment complex, located next door to our convention center — one of the most technologically advanced in the Caribbean — houses the largest 4K horizontal LED screen in the Americas, allowing for a fully immersive experience.

And it goes without saying that it complements the live activities taking place, from live streaming sports events, to live music and concerts. It's captivating. The full magical effect was demonstrated during the broadcast of the first Spanish-language countdown on Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve, featuring a performance from Puerto Rican artist, Daddy Yankee. It creates a more impactful "surround sound" approach to a performance of any kind. When you go to the venue on any given day, you'll see the screens proudly boasting local cultural content, some of which was captured by our very own multimedia team at Discover Puerto Rico.

# #3 CSR Activities Are a Chance to Connect With the Local Community

The most innovative and effective CSR team-building activities allow participants to connect with the local community while also gaining educational value and a sense of accomplishment. I've seen a tremendously positive response to those who engage with our local community as such. While the concept of CSR has been around for decades, we've seen its importance grow in recent years as travelers have become more conscious of their surroundings and look for ways to give back to the local communities.

We have a selection of CSR activities on the island and attendees can simultaneously give back to the community while also immersing themselves in the island's culture and nature. We work with organizations like World Central Kitchen, which manages over 12 smallholder farms, fisheries, and food-related businesses around the island where visitors can plant, harvest, work with animals, and more. For those interested in cultural immersion, The Art Walk is an organization that curates experiences and tours, encouraging appreciation and philanthropy in support of Puerto Rican artists within local and international settings, while COPI (Corporación Piñones Se Integra) dives into the Afro-Puerto-Rican heritage on the island to improve the Afro-centric community — and this does not even scratch the surface in how you can come to Puerto Rico and enjoy while learning and giving back.

# #4 Destination Partners Can Help Lead the Way to Sustainability

DMOs should ensure conversations around sustainability are baked into their RFP responses as much as any other topic or selling point would be and should be proactive in encouraging planners to make their meetings as sustainable as possible.

Our Discover Puerto Rico website has information on how to host eco-friendly meetings and events with recommendations on venues, attractions and lodging accommodations, and our talented sales team is more than happy to walk planners through their options, share their own resources, etc. There are companies out there like MeetGreen that offer sustainability consulting services and NGOs such as CarbonFund from which offsets can be purchased directly.

5 WAYS TO RETHINK MEETINGS AND EVENTS

# #5 DEI Is More Than Just a 'Nice to Have'

DEI is not a nice to have; it's an imperative. It should be our priority as destination marketers to ensure we offer a welcoming and inviting place for all.

The first step is evaluation and the second is education. Ensure you understand your destination fully — your teams, your local stakeholders — and follow that with tailored education for your teams and local industry on how to be inclusive. For many places around the world, this concept is new. And while some destinations celebrate diversity, inclusivity is a much different element.

We've created a robust multiphase strategy which starts with evaluating our team, then moves to implement specialized education tactics that provoke new learning areas. Beyond our internal work, we've taken steps towards making the island itself a more inclusive place. In the LGBTQ+ space, for instance, we've conducted a series of roundtables to listen to the local community, and last September launched a campaign called "Live Out," focusing on how travelers to Puerto Rico can live their authentic selves. In conjunction with this campaign, we created the Pathway to Employment Plan in partnership with Hospitable Me, International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, Hyatt, and the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau. The plan's purpose is to empower members of the LGBTQ+ community as hospitality employees, providing education and resources to both HR departments and job seekers. And this is just the beginning for us. We know we have more work to do, but we are certain that by first observing and understanding where we stand, we can genuinely acknowledge where action needs to be focused to create a more welcoming environment.

## MORE ABOUT BRAD DEAN

Beginning his career in Puerto Rico, Brad Dean first worked as a financial analyst for General Electric, while also meeting his now wife on the island. In 1993, Brad joined the Rank Corporation as unit controller for its Hard Rock Café chain. In 1995, he was tapped to open and lead the Myrtle Beach unit, which became one of the most successful in company history.

Three years later, Brad joined the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce as its chief financial officer and in 2003, was named president and CEO of the Chamber. Under his leadership, the Myrtle Beach tourism industry enjoyed record growth and the organization was named Chamber of Commerce of the Year by the American Chamber of Commerce Executives (2015), while also earning full accreditation from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Destinations International.

Brad currently serves in various leadership roles with a variety of organizations including the U.S. Travel Association, Destinations International, and Meeting Planners International. He is a member of the National Council of State Tourism Directors and also serves on the United States Travel and Tourism Advisory Board. Brad has been active with many charitable organizations.

Originally from Illinois, Brad holds a Bachelor of Science in accounting from the University of Illinois and a master's degree from Moody Bible Institute.

Brad was recently named State Tourism Director of the Year for 2021, by the National Council of State Tourism Directors of the U.S. Travel Association, marking the first win for Puerto Rico. He currently resides in San Juan, Puerto Rico with his family.

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