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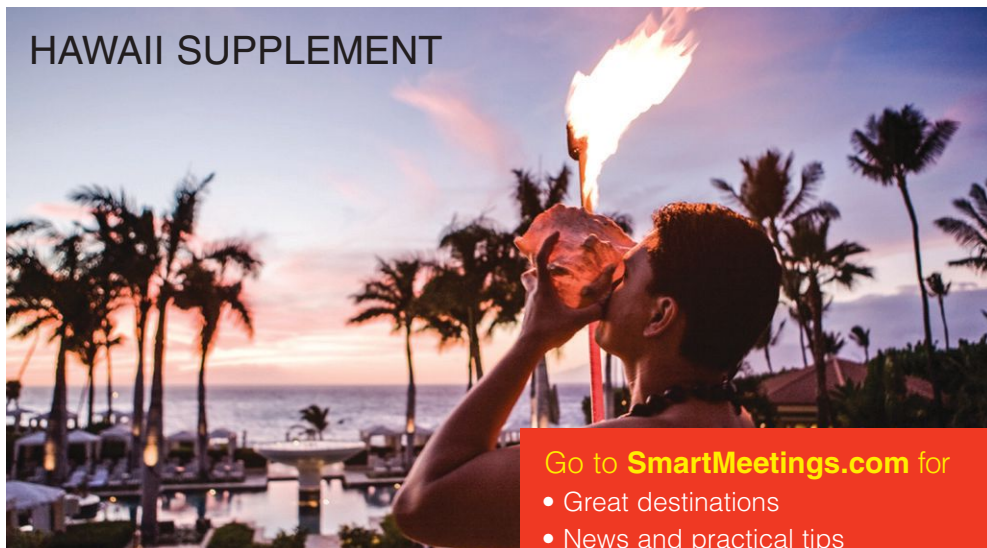
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Just Press GC

Three reasons why all-inclusive resorts can be a perfect no-worries choice for meetings

By Paige Feigenbaum

A

la carte menus can add up, and travel expenses often include hidden fees. Thus the popularity of prix fixe menus and cruise ships. Managing expenses is a challenge for planners, too—ever have an eye-bulging reaction after being handed the hotel bill? The solution may be booking an all-inclusive resort to host your organization's gathering.

"It's the hotel's job to help eliminate the hassles of the total experience, from airport pickup to departure," says Jorge Meraz, group sales director for Velas Resorts in Mexico. "It's the elimination of those hassles that has fueled the increasing popularity of all-inclusive resorts."

"We often hear how our attendees love the fact that all they have to do is sign in [to] restaurants and bars, and never have

to worry about tips; what the mini-bar beverages, food and room service will cost; and if their budget can afford it, because everything is included."

All-inclusive properties remain popular for incentive trips to reward high-performers, but should not be overlooked as venues for meetings. They offer expansive meeting space, buy-out options, and a long list of team-building and recreational activities, in addition to elevated culinary experiences. A bonus is that attendees can continue to enjoy the experience by adding days, and thereby make a bleisure trip out of the gathering.

Here are three reasons why all-inclusive resorts are a great option for meeting groups.



Moon Palace Cancun, Mexico



Palace Foundation's Sea Turtle Release program, Moon Palace Cancun, Mexico



Grand Velas Los Cabos, Mexico



El Mangroove, Gulf of Papagayo, Costa Rica



The Westin Playa Bonita Panama, Panama City



Sandals Montego Bay, Jamaica



Energy wall at Club Med Da Balaia, Portugal

Built-in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives

Many all-inclusive properties are in tropical, exotic locales, where the living conditions of residents and animals may not match the beauty of their beaches. This is where voluntourism comes into play. Meeting professionals can work with resorts to customize conference packages to include corporate social responsibility activities that directly impact local communities and the environment. Meeting-goers can return home with a tan *and* a sense of accomplishment.

Club Med Corporate Foundation works with planners to arrange collection of clothing and products in a donation drive. Sandals Resorts International (SRI) created Sandals Foundation, which has collected more than 3,500 pounds of school supplies

from generous guests for its Pack for a Purpose campaign. Notebooks, pencils, calculators and more are distributed to 26 Caribbean schools adopted by the foundation.

"Before CSR was even a coined term, Sandals Resorts was making it possible for their guests to immerse themselves in the destinations where we operate, and to volunteer their time," says Tonya Hawryluk, director of group business development for SRI, the parent company of Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts.

Its Reading Road Trip Initiative brings guests to visit schools in Jamaica, Antigua, Turks and Caicos, St. Lucia and Exuma District in the Bahamas to encourage literacy. Visitors read to students and help them with

comprehension.

The sun will come out for many more tomorrows after groups dedicate time at Casa Hogar in Cancun, Mexico. Fundacion Palace Resorts IAP, which also has a chapter in Cabo San Lucas, opened the orphanage in November 2015 to provide housing, medical care and recreation for children. Resort guests who volunteer interact with kids, and work on maintenance and gardening projects.

Food for thought: Eating at Moon Palace Cancun not only tastes good—it does good. On Aug. 18–19, Massimo Bottura, a Michelin three-star Italian chef ranked as one of the top 50 chefs in the world, is hosting The Osteria Francescana Experience at the resort



Mystic Mountain,
Ocho Rios, Jamaica



SE Spa at Grand Velas Los Cabos,
Mexico



Woodward at Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya,
Mexico

to raise money for his charity, Food for Soul, which creates and sustains community kitchens globally and raises awareness about food waste.

"Partnering with Massimo Bottura was a natural fit, given that both brands share a love for top-tier culinary experiences, along with a passion for giving back to communities," says Jabib Chapur, vice president of food and beverage for Palace Resorts. "Bringing these events to Moon Palace Cancun is a testament to our commitment to offering unique culinary experiences [while] raising awareness within communities that need a voice."

Trending among several all-inclusive resorts is helping newly hatched baby sea turtles find their way to the ocean. Palace Resorts properties in Cancun participate in Palace Foundation's Sea Turtle Release program.

At night, volunteers and biologists gather on the beach when mama turtles dig nests and lay eggs. If an egg needs extra TLC, it's taken inside to an incubator. When the hatchlings emerge, participants make sure they safely reach the seashore. Sandals Foundation, in partnership with Turtle Watching Tour and Island Routes Caribbean Adventures, takes guests on expeditions with research teams to observe sea turtles during nesting season.

Plenty of resorts that aren't solely all-inclusive offer set-price meeting packages that list CSR as a perk. El Mangroove, Gulf of Papagayo in Costa Rica, which has 40,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and 85 guest suites, arranges for groups to volunteer at local schools. If meeting at The Westin Playa Bonita Panama in Panama City, groups might want to set time aside to help with rehabilitation efforts at the sloth sanctuary rescue center before the cute, furry critters are released into their natural environment.

"The resort does this by organizing volunteers for environmental projects that allow them to get in touch with nature and the conservation of species in danger, such as sloths, as well as the support of waste management with the hotel recycling and conservation programs," says Angel Medina, general manager of The Westin Playa Bonita Panama, which has 65,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and 611 guest rooms.

Unique Experiences

Another benefit of all-inclusive resorts is they provide excursions and activities that guests might otherwise not splurge on. These atypical experiences may prove to be among the most rewarding and memorable team-building exercises. One such example is Creactive, a playground with 25 acrobatic apparatuses for swinging, bouncing and twisting. This installation was built in partnership with Cirque du Soleil and is available at Club Med properties in Punta Cana, Mexico,

the Dominican Republic and Provence, France.

Bring your ninja skills to the new 29,000-square-foot Woodward at Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya, which has 91,555 sq. ft. of meeting and event space and 1,264 guest rooms. The high-octane complex houses Wrecktangle, a ninja-style obstacle course, a skate park, trampolines, foam pits, a media lab, a parkour, indoor dryland snowboarding and skiing.

"This facility is truly something that is out of the ordinary and a great way to switch things up," says Kevin Edmunds, vice president of group sales for AIC Hotel Group, which handles the all-inclusive Hard Rock Hotels and UNICO 20°87° Hotel Riviera Maya.

Feel the rhythm, feel the rhyme, get on up—it's team-building time! Based off the popular 1993 film *Cool Runnings* about the Jamaican Olympic bobsledding team, Mystic Mountain in Ocho Rios built a pseudo-bobsled roller-coaster track through the rain forest. The speed of the sleds is controlled by handbrakes, and guests of Moon Palace Jamaica can redeem resort credit to visit the 100-acre park.

The Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts brands offer special tours via sister company Island Routes Caribbean Adventures to such destinations as Blue Hole, a hidden luminous lagoon in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, and healing mineral mud baths at Sulphur Springs, the world's only drive-in volcano, in St. Lucia. A fun off-site in Barbados takes guests to Oistins Bay Gardens on Friday nights for the weekly fish fry.

With an increased number of business travelers bringing their families along, Beaches Resorts is

Tequila tasting at Barceló Maya Grand Resort, Riviera Maya, Mexico



Club Med Samoens Morillon Grand, France



Club Med Punta Cana Creative by Cirque du Soleil, Dominican Republic



Straw Mosaics at Grand Velas Los Cabos, Mexico



proud to have an exclusive partnership with *Sesame Street*. Its Caribbean Adventures with Sesame Street program put Beaches on the map as the first resort brand to meet International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards and Autism Certification. (In April, Sesame Place in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, became the first theme park in the world to be designated as a Certified Autism Center.)

"We are continuing to bring local color into the more unexpected parts of a meeting and guest stay," says Meraz of Velas Resorts. "For instance, our arts and crafts meeting breaks that are designed not only as team-building exercises, but also to stimulate creativity, are a big success."

Craft workshops include weaving dream catchers at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit and creating straw mosaics at Velas Vallarta. During meeting breaks, planners can also arrange a Spa Atelier workshop. Options include mandala meditation, tea discovery, DIY bath scrubs, aromatherapy and energy bites comprised of superfoods.

Grand Velas, which has resorts in Riviera Nayarit, Riviera Maya and Los Cabos, offers micro-adventures that take C-suite executives via helicopter to Mayan ruins, to one of Mexico's oldest tequila houses, and on a private jet to Baja California's wineries.

Several Barcelo Hotel Group locations also showcase out-of-the-ordinary experiences, such as bachata dance lessons and trips to rum or cigar factories for guests at Barcelo Bavaro Grand Resort in Dominican Republic and eco-archeological riverboat tours in Xcaret Park for groups staying at Occidental at Xcaret

Destination in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Planners can order a bottle of Xtabentun, a liqueur from Mexico's Yucatan region, to be delivered to each guest as an in-room amenity at Barcelo Maya Grand Resort in Riviera Maya, Mexico. Groups can get hands-on at a guacamole-making or tequila-tasting class at Royal Hideaway Playacar, also in Playa del Carmen.

You'll Be Coming Back for Seconds

Subpar food and watered-down cocktails at some all-inclusives have left a bad taste in mouths of guests and planners. But many properties have revamped their whole approach to catering.

"Once upon a time, there was a group of customers who felt that the all-inclusive concept may compromise their luxury experience," Hawryluk says. "At Sandals, we've worked very hard to dispel that myth with truly spectacular hotels...and authentic international cuisines."

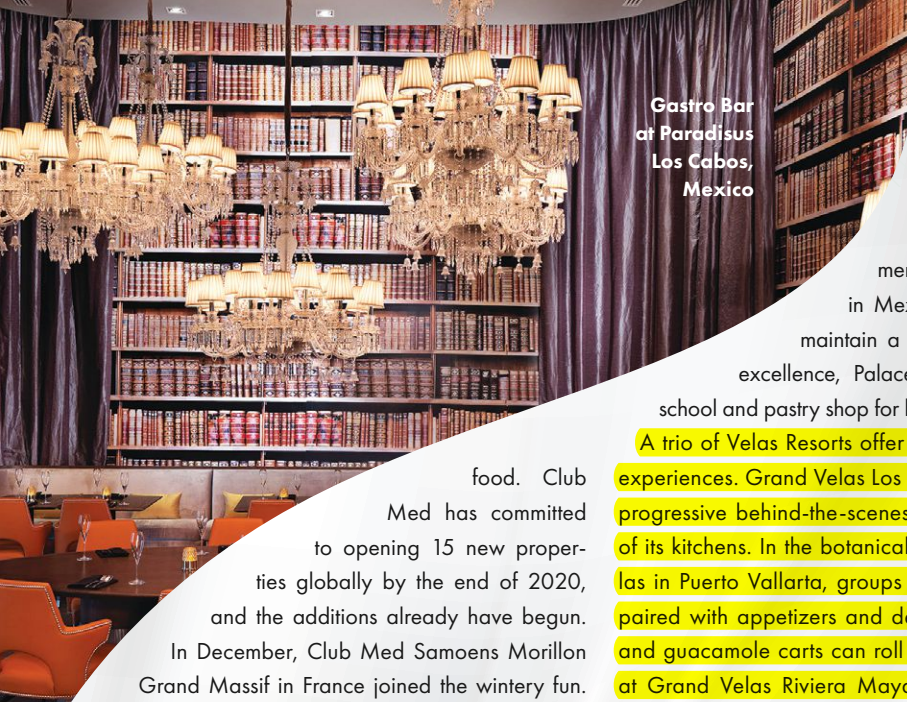
The Sandals and Beaches brands hold themselves to a high standard with a five-star Global Gourmet dining commitment, which includes 21 cuisines representing different cultures, up to 16 restaurants and 11 bars per resort, and an exclusive partnership with Robert Mondavi Twin Oaks as its house wine. The brands provide a culinary concierge desk to assist planners and guests in making necessary menu

accommodations for those with allergies, sensitivities and preferences.

Up to 10 diners are in for a treat at Barcelo's 201-room Royal Hideaway Playacar in Riviera Maya. The adults-only property has three meeting rooms and six restaurants, including Las Ventanas. It claims to be the only eatery on the Yucatan Peninsula that is based on interaction with the chef, and he's not just any chef—he's Alejandro Sanchez, who received a Michelin star rating. His Chef's Table is a six- or 12-course gourmet tasting menu. Guests are given a clear view of the kitchen through windows and can view live video feeds as their meal is prepared.

"Attendees expect more out of meetings these days—they're looking for a healthy atmosphere for the body and mind, and that is especially true when it comes to food and beverage options," says Juan Perez Sosa, senior vice president of sales and marketing for Barcelo Hotel Group in the United States. "Guests will enjoy a wide range of authentic flavors, along with peace of mind that comes with eating mindfully."

From ski slopes to sandy beaches, the France-based Club Med, the largest all-inclusive resort brand in the world, takes pride in plating delicious



Gastro Bar
at Paradisus
Los Cabos,
Mexico

menu for its 10 properties in Mexico and Jamaica. To maintain a high-level of culinary excellence, Palace opened a cooking school and pastry shop for kitchen staff.

A trio of Velas Resorts offer special group dining experiences. Grand Velas Los Cabos gives guests a progressive behind-the-scenes tasting tour of three of its kitchens. In the botanical garden at Casa Velas in Puerto Vallarta, groups can taste craft beers paired with appetizers and desserts. New ceviche and guacamole carts can roll in to meeting venues at Grand Velas Riviera Maya with a selection of seafood and 10 varieties of guacamole. This property is also home to Cocina de Autor, the first all-inclusive resort restaurant in the world to receive a AAA Five Diamond Award.

food. Club Med has committed to opening 15 new properties globally by the end of 2020, and the additions already have begun. In December, Club Med Samoens Morillon Grand Massif in France joined the wintery fun. Guests can dine at Skyline Gourmet Lounge, led by Michelin chef Edouard Loubet. Another Michelin chef, Andrea Berton, is overseeing dining at Club Med Cefalu in Sicily, Italy, that opened this summer.

Palace Resorts has teamed up with Antonio Bachour, a world-renowned pastry chef, to create an exclusive

Eight-star Michelin chef Martin Berasategui's name is affiliated with three Mexico restaurants

that are part of Paradisus by Melia's collection—Passion at Paradisus Playa del Carmen La Perla, Gastro Bar at Paradisus Los Cabos in San Jose del Cabo and Tempo at Paradisus Cancun. Paradisus' expansive meeting space also attracts the MICE market, which accounted for 21 percent of its business in 2017. Its convention center in Playa Del Carmen has 25,000 sq. ft. of function space, the Cancun property has well over 100,000 sq. ft. and Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, houses a 16,145-square-foot convention center.

"Since the opening of our first all-inclusive Paradisus in the Caribbean in 1996, Paradisus Resorts' food and beverage experience has not only improved, but transformed into gastronomical experiences for our guests," says Carmelina Iannarone, director of corporate groups for Melia Hotels International. 

Will Marriott Add All-Inclusive Resorts?

Rumors have been flying for some time now about Marriott International potentially getting in on the all-inclusive game. Here's what we have been able to uncover so far.

In September 2016, Marriott completed acquisition of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide. The merger made Marriott the largest hotel company in the world. In January 2017, Sandals Resorts International (SRI) and Marriott announced a partnership to open the lifestyle brand AC Hotels by Marriott in the Caribbean, though the properties will be a departure from Sandals' all-inclusive format. Marriott already offers all-inclusive vacation packages at select resorts in Mexico, the Caribbean and Costa Rica.

In regard to the possibility of establishing all-inclusive resorts, Marriott president and CEO Arne Sorenson told *forbes.com* in June 2017, "It's something we're watching. I'm curious." When specifically questioned about a potential acquisition of Sandals, he smiled and walked away.

Maintaining its autonomy, Sandals appointed Gebhard F. Rainer as its new CEO in March 2018. "Sandals Resorts has a legacy of pioneering and implementing industry innovations, and we are committed to not only bolstering our leadership position in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean, but also to broaden our horizons with further growth of the luxury all-inclusive concept beyond the region we

call home," said Gordon "Butch" Stewart, chairman of SRI. "For 22 consecutive years, Sandals Resorts has proudly earned the distinction of being voted the World's Best All-Inclusive Resorts, for which we are immensely proud."

While not going into specific plans, Anthony Capuano, executive vice president and global chief development officer for Marriott, addressed the all-inclusives topic in a June 2018 *Skift* article. "We think it's obviously a rapidly growing business, and to me, because I have the good fortune to get a bit of global view, it's not just a platform that makes sense in Caribbean," he said, adding that he's noticed more all-inclusive resorts opening in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, and pointedly mentioned that they've become popular among outbound Chinese travelers.

