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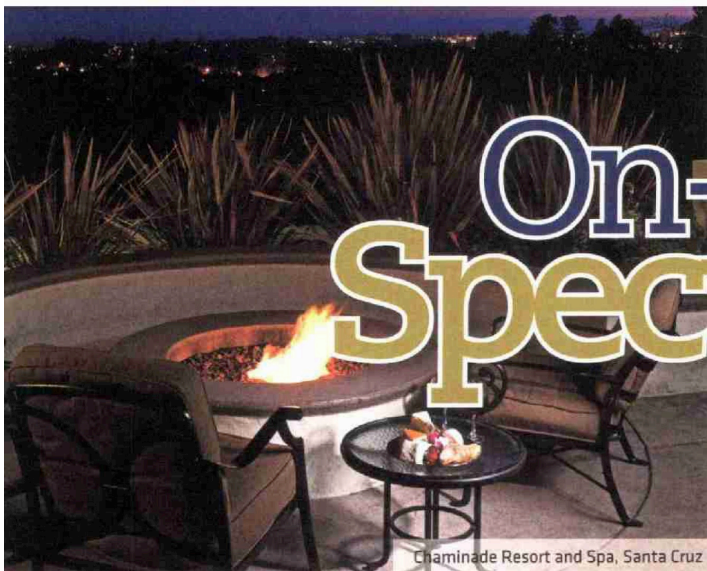
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Chaminade Resort and Spa, Santa Cruz

On-Site Spectaculars

Northern California hotels and resorts wow attendees with one-of-a-kind spaces

BY MARIA LENHART

While often it's the off-site venue that really captures the essence of the destination and provides a special fillip to the meeting agenda, that doesn't need to be the case. Increasingly, hotels are creating venues of their own that seem a world away from the typical ballroom or function area.

Nowhere is this truer than in Northern California, where many hotels and resorts feature event areas where the ambience and food and beverage experiences rival anyplace off-site. Here are a few to consider.

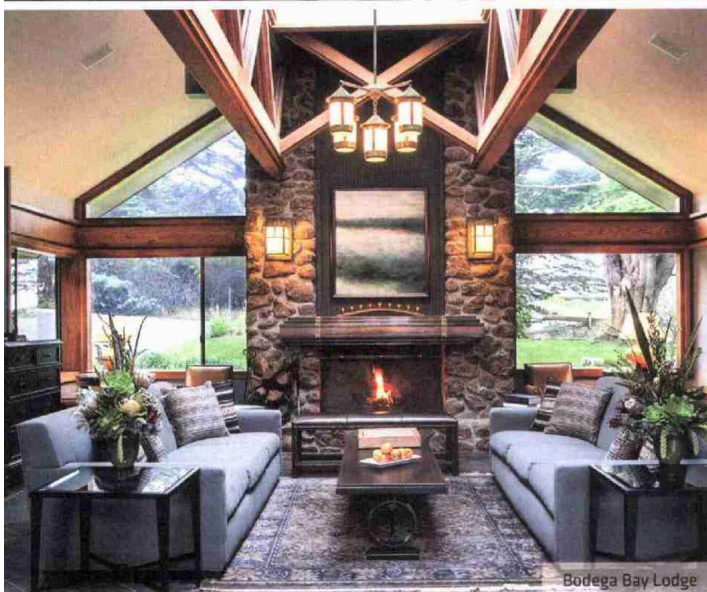
Estate Charm

Built in tiers on a Sausalito hillside, the Casa Madrona Hotel & Spa (www.casamadrone.com) recently unveiled a whole new dimension to the boutique property that includes the Mansion, a renovated 11-room former residence dating from 1885, and adjacent meeting space with sweeping views that take in San Francisco Bay, the Bay Bridge and the San Francisco skyline.

The crown jewel of the new space is the Alexandrite Suite, which includes a nine-panel media wall, living area with fireplace, gourmet kitchen, dining table for 10 and a two-level terrace with lounge seating, an outdoor bar and a fire pit. Also new is Junto, a 1,700-square-foot boardroom with panoramic views, a media wall and an adjoining deck. The hotel is offering packages that enable groups to book the Mansion, adjacent hillside cottages and the new meeting spaces.

"With the Alexandrite Suite and Junto, groups can do a business presentation during the day and then enjoy an evening with a real 'wow' factor," says General Manager Sietse Nabben. "The chef can come in and prepare a special dinner right in the suite and then people can enjoy the twinkling lights around the bay with evening cocktails on the terrace."

In downtown Healdsburg, the

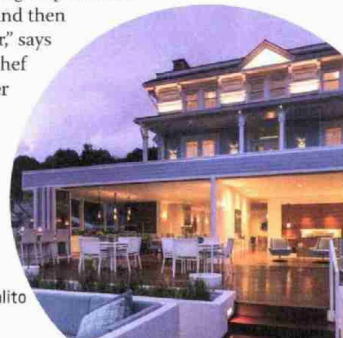


Bodega Bay Lodge



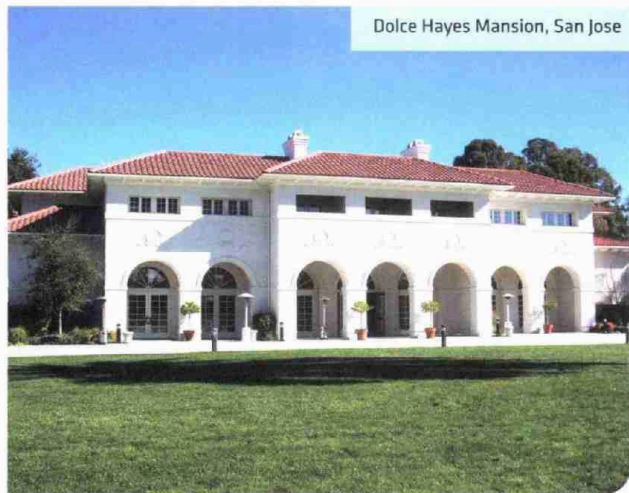
Hotel Healdsburg, Carriage House

Casa Madrona, Mansion, Sausalito



Hotel Healdsburg (www.hotelhealdsburg.com) captures the essence of the surrounding wine country with event spaces that include the Carriage House, a room with a vaulted ceiling, exposed beams and a barn-style door that opens onto a lawn; the Grange Hall, which has a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and

com), a 1905 Spanish Colonial-style manor with spacious grounds. The property, a member of the International Association of Conference Centres (IACC), combines state-of-the-art meetings technology with atmospheric function spaces. Among them is the Willow Glen Room, with its marble fireplace



Dolce Hayes Mansion, San Jose

plantation shutters; the Wine Library, an intimate room lined with bottles of rare wines; and the Screen Porch, a private dining room with chandeliers made of wine bottles.

A major draw for meetings is that catering is provided by Dry Creek Kitchen, the hotel's acclaimed restaurant owned by Chef Charlie Palmer, says Jason Farmer, director of sales.

"When you're dining in one of our meeting spaces, you are getting a fine restaurant experience, which is hugely important in this area," he says. "We also use lighting and decor in such a way that you can do a meeting during the day and return to the same room for dinner and not even realize you're in the same room."

A gracious Edwardian-era venue right in the midst of ultra-modern Silicon Valley? While that may sound unlikely, that's exactly what planners will find at San Jose's Dolce Hayes Mansion (www.hayesmansion.com),

and gleaming paneling, as well as a number of Parlor rooms with rich wood detailing and bay windows.

Urban Sophisticates

Where do the movers and shakers in Sacramento congregate for a gala evening? Very likely they are to be found at the Citizen Hotel (www.jdvhotels.com), a historic 198-room property in close proximity of the state capitol building. The hotel's Metropolitan Terrace, which can accommodate up to 200 for a seated event or up to 300 for a reception, offers two full walls of windows framing views of the golden Capitol dome and the downtown cityscape. Another prime gathering spot is the Scandal Lounge, an intimate event space reminiscent of a 1920s speakeasy adorned with autographed napkins of the many political and show business celebrities that have stayed at the hotel.

"When our hotel was remod-

eled and opened in 2008, our owners really wanted it to have a sense of place, which is probably why we draw so many politicians as well as association and corporate groups," says Ryan Brough, sales manager. "Another draw is our four-star Grange restaurant, one of the first to practice the farm-to-fork concept, which supplies all of the banquet food."

Iconic views of the Ferry Building, Embarcadero and the Bay Bridge are hallmarks of the Hotel Vitale (www.jdvhotels.com) in San Francisco, which offers several spacious event suites with adjoining terraces. Signature events at the hotel include an excursion with the chef to shop for ingredients from the food purveyors in the Ferry Building, which are then used to prepare a lunch for the attendees.

"San Francisco doesn't have a lot of outdoor event space, so groups really enjoy the chance to have an outdoor lunch on a terrace as part of the meeting," says Al Smyth, director of events. "At night, it's even more magical, with the lights on the bay and the bridge."

A short walk from San Francisco's Moscone Center, the Parc 55 Wyndham (www.parc55hotel.com) offers newly renovated suites and lounge areas on the top two floors of the 32-story hotel, all with stellar city views that encompass Twin Peaks, Union Square and the Bay. An elegant gathering spot for small groups is the Presidential Suite, with its dining and living areas in soft beige tones. Larger cocktail receptions or private dinners can be held in the Executive Club Lounge, adorned with art glass and dark woods.

In Oakland, The Terrace Room at the Lake Merritt Hotel (www.lakemerrithotel.com), dating from 1927 and a hot spot during the Big Band era, makes a splendid Art Deco setting for dinners, receptions and other private events for up to 350 people. Overlooking Lake Merritt,

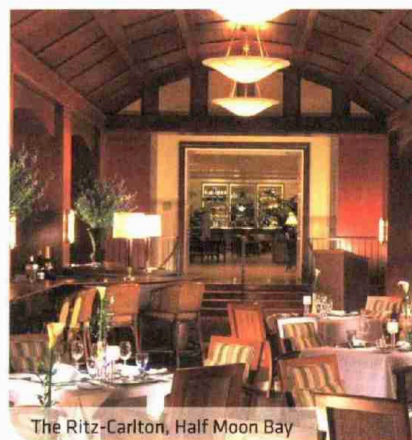
which at night is ringed by an enchanting necklace of lights, the venue features California cuisine menus drawing on local ingredients. It includes a dance floor and a mural depicting the lake as it appeared in the 1940s.

Coastal Idylls

While only a short drive from San Francisco and Silicon Valley, The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay (www.ritzcarlton.com), with its rolling fairways and dramatic ocean cliffs, could almost be on the coast of Scotland. Meeting areas such as the Miramontes room, which has its own deck and a fire pit overlooking the ocean, take full advantage of the coastal environment. Private dining areas such as the Library and Fireplace rooms are the settings for customized events that highlight local produce and fine wines. These include the Vintner's Series, wine pairing dinners with commentary from local winemakers.

"For larger events or an opening reception, we can do a 'fire and wine' theme on the Ocean Lawn, with fire pits, wine barrels and carts filled with locally grown produce and flowers," says Chrissy Wean, director of sales. "There's no need to spend money on special decor—it's hard to beat sitting around a fire with a glass of wine while the sun sets into the Pacific."

Up the coast in Bodega Bay, the Bodega Bay Lodge (www.bodegabaylodge.com) also lets



The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay

its secluded oceanfront setting take center stage at events. The 83-room property offers the Captain's Quarters, a living room-like space with a fireplace and a wraparound deck, and the Wave Room, a 1,100-square-foot space with a stone fireplace and adjoining deck overlooking a bird sanctuary.

"We're all about bringing the beauty of the outdoors into the meeting room," says Brian Larsen, director of sales. "Our chef loves to prepare special meals for groups, taking advantage of the daily seafood catch and cheese farms in the area."

property for executive retreats, especially in seasons other than summer," says Kristen Taylor, sales manager. "We can have our chef prepare special dinners and arrange for outdoor yoga classes and other activities. It's a tranquil spot."

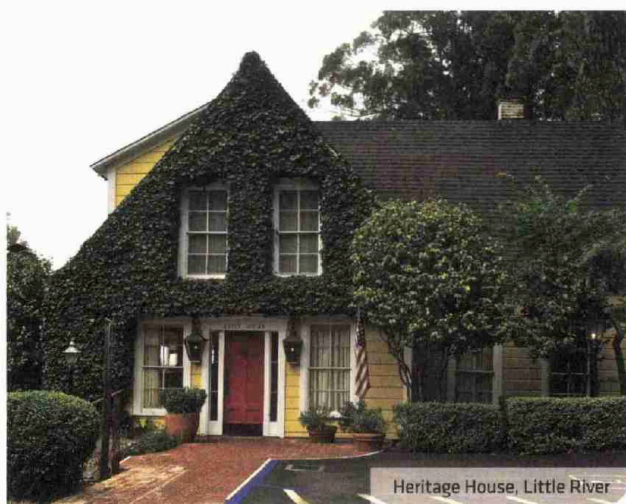
With 300 acres of wooded grounds overlooking Monterey Bay, Chaminade Resort & Spa (www.chaminade.com) in Santa Cruz is another property where meeting venues take full advantage of its natural environment. The resort, which is an IACC member, features sweeping bay views from its second-floor

With a vantage point high above the cypress trees and rocky cliffs just south of Monterey, the Hyatt Carmel Highlands (www.highlandsinn.hyatt.com) offers several meeting venues with some of the most breathtaking vistas imaginable. Outdoor spaces include the Gazebo Deck, a spacious redwood deck set amid lush green gardens that can accommodate up to 120 people for a cocktail reception. Indoor spaces with equally stellar views include the Surf Room, which includes an adjoining balcony, and Yankee Point, an intimate space with a

dance floor and a wood-burning fireplace.

For customized dinners with a truly VIP feel, the hotel's Pacific Edge restaurant offers the Wine Room, a glassed-in private area seating up to 40 that is lined with cabinets of rare wines and attended by its own waitstaff. **mi**

MARIA LENHART recently enjoyed a special event in *Casa Madrona's* Alexandrite Suite that included gathering in the sumptuous living area to watch the San Francisco Giants clinch the World Series on the giant media wall.



Heritage House, Little River

Just south of Mendocino in Little River, Heritage House Resort (www.heritagehouseresort.com) reopened last year under new ownership. The historic property features 72 newly renovated units in ocean-view cottages on bluffs above the Pacific, including one called "Same Time, Next Year" that was the setting for the movie of the same name.

The resort's main venue is its Victorian-era Main House, which offers a two-level dining room with wraparound ocean views that can be used for meetings. An option for small groups is Vista House, which includes a main living room, catering kitchen and a deck.

"Groups can buy out the

meeting rooms.

"Outdoor events are popular here, especially in our courtyard terrace that overlooks the bay," says Jeff Livingston, director of sales and marketing. "We can do a farm-to-table dinner there, where we bring in a local farmer and vintner."

A completely different event option at Chaminade centers around its ropes course, a place where groups can combine teambuilding with catered events in a forested setting of eucalyptus and redwood trees.

"We partner with a teambuilding company called Synergy and can do a lot of customized events there," Livingston says. "It's a beautiful area; we call it our 'back 40.'"

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