

L.A.: Downtown & Hollywood A Star is Born

by [Carolyn Blackburn](#)

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While many destinations promise the proverbial red carpet treatment, L.A.'s famed Hollywood and downtown areas roll out the real thing. After all, the epicenter of filmmaking has long been equated to glitz and glamour, a world that most of us only glimpse as we flip through *People* magazine when we're in line at the grocery store.

So when delegates know they're visiting Los Angeles for a convention, they anticipate being a part of what they see in the tabloids and on the silver screen.

"Groups coming to L.A. with meetings look forward to playing into the theme of 'lights, camera, action,'" says Katie Callahan-Giobbi, senior vice president of sales at LA Inc., The Convention and Visitors Bureau.

She adds that planners are welcome to tap into L.A.'s "hugely artistic community" in order to execute especially memorable programs.

"We have very creative suppliers in general in L.A., which becomes evident in the design and messaging of events," she says. "There is a creativity bug here, and you just can't imagine some of the creative events we've had."

The solid foundation for such knockout events can be found in venues throughout downtown and Hollywood, which are both touching up their meetings infrastructures for a close-up.

Downtown L.A.

One recent news item circulating in Los Angeles faster than the lowdown about celebrity hookups and breakups is that downtown is undergoing a major renaissance.

"Downtown is coming into her own; it's a fascinating and phenomenal time," Callahan-Giobbi says.

Home to cultural icons such as the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall, which opened in 2003, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), downtown L.A.'s most recent transformations are giving visitors a chance to take advantage of trendy new restaurants, cafes and nightclubs, newly revitalized areas such as the Fashion District, hip new art thoroughfares like Gallery Row, and evolving areas such as the Seventh Street Corridor, which is morphing into a social hub of dining, entertainment and residential offerings.

Meanwhile, one of the most exciting mega developments taking shape downtown is the L.A. Live entertainment district, complete with dining and nightlife options, and large theaters. Callahan-Giobbi says L.A. Live, coined the Times Square of the West, will open in stages and is tentatively scheduled for completion during the first part of 2010.

L.A. Live is on track to unveil its initial phase when the Nokia Theatre Los Angeles opens this year. The 7,000-seat Nokia Theatre, a premier midsize theater for concerts, award shows, theatrical productions, and Broadway shows, will eventually be joined by a 1,000-room Los Angeles Convention Center (LACC) headquarters hotel that will combine an 876-room JW Marriott and a 124-room Ritz-Carlton hotel. The JW Marriott will feature the city's largest ballroom, with a capacity for 3,000 seated guests.

"This all changes L.A.'s main meetings infrastructure," Callahan-Giobbi says, adding that although there are currently no confirmed details, the LACC is slated for a future expansion. "Now attendees will have access to restaurants and hotels and entertainment adjacent to the convention center. It will be incredibly interactive."

While attendees will have all the necessary amenities right at their fingertips via L.A. Live, planners will still be encouraged to take them off-site for a taste of the city's inherent glamour.

For unique off-site options, Callahan-Giobbi recommends several downtown venues that deliver on L.A.'s unique culture, including Los Angeles Center Studios, a full-service movie studio campus that accommodates terrific themed programs, including corporate events, presentations and receptions. Its variety of event venues includes six 18,000-square-foot soundstages; outdoor decks with views of the downtown skyline; a 400-seat theater; executive boardrooms; and 1,200 parking spaces.

Two more sure bets to dazzle and dazzle groups L.A.-style for off-site events, according to Callahan-Giobbi, are the stunning Walt Disney Concert Hall, which boasts exceptional acoustics and a calendar of classical music and jazz concerts, and the Figueroa Hotel.

"The hotel's decor is uniquely Moroccan, and they put on fabulous Moroccan theme parties complete with belly dancers and baby camels," she says.

Joining the Figueroa Hotel as meetings-ready downtown candidates are several other properties, including standouts such as the 1,354-room Westin Bonaventure Hotel and Suites, which completed a floor-by-floor guest room renovation last year and features more than 100,000 square feet of function space; the 900-room Wilshire Grand Hotel Los Angeles, which has more than 50,000 square feet of function space and just completed a multimillion-dollar makeover of its two premiere ballrooms, and is scheduled to unveil the second phase of its overall remodel with a completely new look in 2008; and the landmark Millennium Biltmore Hotel Los Angeles, a circa-1920s charmer that has hosted star-studded award shows.

New hotels with meeting space are also coming on-line in downtown L.A., including upcoming debuts such as Gansevoort West, the West Coast incarnation of the stylish Hotel Gansevoort that debuted in Manhattan's Meatpacking District a few years back. The property, a conversion of the former circa-1914 Trinity Theater, is scheduled to open this fall with 170 rooms and suites, an 1,800-seat rooftop amphitheater that will host performances and double as meeting space, two rooftop lounges, a spa, and a glass-bottom pool stretching over two restaurants.

Additionally, a 275-room Mandarin Oriental is slated to open by 2010 as part of the first phase of downtown L.A.'s Grand Avenue development, which will also feature retail space, residential units, an event facility, a park, and other amenities.

Meanwhile, numerous downtown properties are renovating facilities. Aside from the enhancements to the Wilshire Grand and the Westin Bonaventure, other hotels that are applying upgrades include the Sheraton Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Marriott Downtown, the Hilton Checkers Los Angeles, and the New Otani Hotel and Garden.

Other downtown L.A. options well suited to groups include the Omni Los Angeles Hotel at California Plaza, featuring 453 guest rooms and 20,000 square feet of function space, including the 8,500-square-foot Bunker Hill Ballroom, as well as the award-winning Noe restaurant and a new spa, and The Standard, a hip hotel housed in the former Standard Oil Building. The property's slick rooftop bar, boasting 360-degree views of the city, is available for private events, and the hotel offers a number of other facilities for meetings.

Aside from the evolving nature of the city, there are plenty of additional qualities that distinguish L.A., according to Callahan-Giobbi.

"Another thing that makes L.A. unique is that, unlike San Francisco and other cities, it was built horizontally, not vertically," she says, acknowledging the perception that it's impossible to get from one exciting neighborhood to another within L.A. "Southern California is definitely a car culture—we love our cars—but there is also a Metro line that gets you from downtown to Hollywood in only 18 minutes, and of course when a meeting is held downtown it's very tempting to go to Hollywood."

Hollywood

While downtown is making a new mark on the L.A. scene, Callahan-Giobbi says Hollywood has always been the apple of Los Angeles' eye, the place to see the stars both etched in the sidewalks and strolling along them.

Elizabeth McDonald, vice president of tourism and special events at the Hollywood COC, couldn't agree more.

"There's an electricity here that is uniquely ours," she says, citing one activity delegates won't find in any other destination: a Star Ceremony on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. "Honorary Mayor Johnny Grant still puts on a great show every time a celebrity puts their name in bronze and pink terrazzo on this most famous sidewalk in the world. Beyond that, putting your hand into the cement that has immortalized our greatest movie heroes can't be done anywhere else in the world!"

Though the average visitor may have trouble getting into Teddy's, a popular nightlife hot spot for the celebrity in-crowd located inside the Roosevelt Hotel Hollywood, McDonald and Callahan-Giobbi agree that many such venues are available for buyouts for off-site parties.

"In Hollywood, you might think you've been to the hottest club and then another one opens," Callahan-Giobbi says, citing DJ AM's (aka Adam Goldstein, the once-future Mr. Nicole Richie) club LAX.

"Planners should also keep The Music Box @ Fonda in mind for a fun, hip venue," McDonald says. "The Music Box hosts live concerts, but private parties are a real treat in this space."

Among Hollywood's other hot spots that allow delegates to become intimately familiar with the destination's inner workings are the Hollywood Museum and Paramount Studios, which are both available for special events.

Housed in the historic Max Factor Building, the Hollywood Museum, according to McDonald, boasts one of the best movie costume, prop and set collections in the world. Groups are welcome to tour the facility, which also accommodates receptions and sit-down banquets.

"The Kodak Theatre is the quickest and easiest spot for the 'glamour' tour," McDonald adds, explaining that although the facility is closed in February for the Oscars, it welcomes group tours during the rest of the year. "Since [the tour] is only 30 minutes long, planners can allow groups the time to shop at Hollywood and Highland, and to search for the hand and footprints of their favorite stars [at Grauman's Chinese Theatre]."

For smaller groups, McDonald suggests booking the Blossom Room, which hosted the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929, at the historic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. The Blossom Room was recently renovated along with the hotel's other meeting venues as part of a \$30 million property-wide upgrade.

"The Hollywood Roosevelt is the hottest name in Hollywood these days," she says.

The popular Roosevelt is situated near the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel, which is adjacent to the Hollywood and Highland entertainment, shopping and dining complex.

"Hollywood currently has a shocking lack of large convention space," McDonald says, adding that the 637-room Renaissance currently handles most of the larger convention groups in Hollywood.

Soon though, the 300-room W Hollywood will move in as part of the mixed-use Hollywood and Vine project, located across from the Pantages Theater. Due for completion in 2009, the hotel will feature meeting facilities, a signature restaurant, a rooftop bar, a 9,200-square-foot spa, and a 25-yard lap pool.

"We will finally see ground broken on the W hotel," McDonald enthuses. "It will be a property similar to the Renaissance, with meeting space and rooms for conventions. We are thrilled about the W coming into town."

While a planner's best bet is to call LA Inc., The Convention and Visitors Bureau or the Hollywood COC directly for ideas regarding group lodging and activities, McDonald offers a few noteworthy suggestions.

Red Line Tours features a walking tour that introduces groups to Hollywood Boulevard, inside and out, in one hour, she says.

"Fun also abounds at the Hollywood Wax Museum, Hollywood Guinness Museum and Ripley's Believe It or Not," McDonald says.

Another recent addition to Hollywood's eclectic museum mix is the Erotic Museum, which opened in 2003 about a block from the Kodak Theatre. Among the numerous exhibits featured at the facility are etchings by Pablo Picasso and photographs of Marilyn Monroe by Tom Kelly.

"You can also take a horseback ride through the Hollywood Hills for a unique view of Hollywood and L.A.," McDonald adds. "As for eating, we have it all!"

McDonald cites options such as Wolfgang Puck's Twist, a "to die for" restaurant in the Renaissance Hotel; Musso and Frank Grill, the "best spot for star sightings"; and Pig N Whistle, a Hollywood landmark.

For More Info

Hollywood COC 323.469.8311 www.hollywoodchamber.net

LA Inc., The Convention and Visitors Bureau 213.624.7300 www.seemyla.com

—Freelance writer Carolyn Blackburn is a former Meetings Media editor.