

THE TRENDS SHAPING LUXURY MEETINGS AND EVENTS IN 2017

A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEETING PLANNERS LOOKING TO
DEFINE THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS EVENTS



ABOUT FOUR SEASONS HOTELS AND RESORTS

Four Seasons is the world's leading luxury hospitality company. Founded in 1960, the company manages one of the world's largest portfolios of luxury hotels, resorts and private residences, including 104 hotels and residences in major city centres and resort destinations in 43 countries, with more than 50 projects in development. Four Seasons consistently ranks among the best hotels and most prestigious brands in reader polls, traveller reviews and industry awards. For meetings and events, Four Seasons combines the most desirable international destinations with strategic venue design, authentic local dining and inspiring group experiences – all orchestrated by a team of passionate, intuitive Four Seasons experts.

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FOUR SEASONS
HOTELS AND RESORTS

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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing Media, Insights & Marketing to key sectors of travel.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners on integrated projects including webinars, video, research, and live events.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email at skiftx@skift.com.

MASTHEAD

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INTRODUCTION

At Skift, our annual Megatrends Forecast highlights the big overarching trends defining the travel industry in the year ahead. In this year's forecast, Skift Editor Greg Oates highlighted a new theme: The Festivalization of Meetings and Events.

Simply put, it's a nod to smart conference organizers who pull from both the business and creative industries to develop more multidisciplinary programming that engages attendees on more levels. In a similar fashion to the way music festivals have been programmed for years, blending brands and bands, the next generation of meetings deliver content that resonates both professionally and personally.

That convergence of experiences helps individual attendees plug-and-play into business events in a wider variety of ways, helping drive organic engagement, and it helps meeting planners achieve a higher degree of mass personalization. In that regard, the festivalization theme is relevant for any upscale meeting or event, ranging from a corporate incentive program on a tropical island to a gala product launch in an urban hotel.

The end goal is a higher return on experience for attendees and a higher return on investment for organizations. Designing more immersive networking experiences and learning environments helps educate and entertain participants more effectively. The overarching concept is based on the emerging belief that business events do not have to be a place meant only for professional development and teambuilding, but a space for individual personal enrichment as well.

In this Skift Insights Deck, we explore key trends, concepts, and strategies for meeting planners to keep in mind when designing their next event.

Special thanks to Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts for sponsoring this project, which also included a webinar in which experts from both Skift and Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts explored these trends further.

THE RISE OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY MEETING DESIGN

We live in a second-screen world. We multitask in both online and offline worlds, moving seamlessly, simultaneously, and intuitively between the two. Therefore, meetings and events should be the same, versus the flat and linear programs from yesterday. Today, every meeting is a so-called “hybrid meeting” to the point where the phrase has lost its meaning.

TED in Vancouver, South by Southwest in Austin, and C2 Montreal gave rise to this integrated format with conferences delivering omnichannel content that changed how people view the entire meetings and events industry. Convergence is the new innovation.

“The fact that we have so many convergent sessions that speak to people in different sectors has been hugely important to our success,” says Mike Shea, director of SXSW. “What we do well is getting the creative community in one room to launch next generation product platforms for the beta community. We create opportunities and places where magic happens.”

That event design philosophy is now expanding worldwide, spawning a revolution in conference user experience everywhere. It’s also trickling down into the hospitality space where planners are using the entire scope of properties as multidisciplinary event venues.

Reacting to that shift, hotel architects are designing larger and/or more flexible social spaces, and they’re removing obstacles that impede movement between indoor and outdoor environments, which gives hotels more options for free-flowing group experiences. The vision behind this is aligned with today’s co-working and co-living megatrends, where people want to either be alone together, or together together, with the option to shift easily between each sphere when they want to.

“The whole move toward communal areas in hotels, with a popular central bar and group tables designed for mixed use, started 5-10 years ago and it’s just continuing even more so,” says Kathleen Dauber, a partner at Santa Monica-based Hirsch Bedner Associates, which specializes in hotel design. “There’s now much more hang-out space. We want the guest to hang out in the lobby. We want them in the living room, the library, and as many different social spaces in the same area as possible.”



MULTIDISCIPLINARY EVENTS REQUIRE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PLANNERS

The formula behind the world's most creative "innovation conferences," like SXSW and C2 Montreal, is generally the same: Pull together the most inspiring minds in business, tech, media, science, education, art, and culture inside a cross-section of colorful venues and collaborative spaces. Then hit "blend" with integrated online and offline catalysts, virtual and augmented reality experiences, startup pitch competitions, live music performances and art exhibits, and local offsite experiences to create spontaneous collisions between participants in unprecedented ways.

That requires a new type of collaboration among event planning teams. In late 2016, the Freeman event company created a new Design Leadership Council with professionals from diverse organizations such as the U.S. Military Cyber Command and Walt Disney™ Imagineering. The goal is to experiment with more ambitious convergences between creative environments, new technologies, innovative brands, and visionary people.

"The principle I apply is really to bring wicked teams to wicked problems," says Bruce Mau, chief design officer at Freeman. "With all the new problems these days, you have to think about what's needed to synthesize all of the content input today to produce a new kind of synthetic media output. It's not a singular practice anymore. It's all built by teams, so you need people who are experts at teams."

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A SHIFT TOWARD RESIDENTIAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL EVENT SPACE

In the recent IACC [Meeting Room of the Future](#) research series, 47 percent of meeting planners state that flexible meeting space is more important today than in the past to deliver programs that resonate with today's attendees. "Clients want to dictate layouts dependent on what they want to do," says research participant Rachael Bartlett, head of sales and marketing at Warwick Conferences. "They are no longer satisfied with traditional room setups."

Companies like Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts are aligning with these trends in various ways. One of them is making greater use of luxury residential homes and suites for private corporate events. The move toward more residential settings for groups is also being driven by the growing interest in home-sharing worldwide.

"Many of our hotels offer residential units, which groups like to use for hospitality suites, small meetings, and food and beverage functions," says Jonathan Sicroff, SVP, Global Sales, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. The expectations are really high in the luxury space, so planners are looking for new experiences. They're looking for something fresh."

New online event booking companies such as Bizly, Spacebase, and MeetingsBooker are growing in popularity because event planners want to book on-demand meeting space in creative venues, such as hotel rooftops, restaurants, and lounges.

"All of these companies today are talking about innovation and creativity," says Jan Hoffmann-Keining, founder of Spacebase. "But a lot of people are realizing that if you keep meeting in the same rooms and thinking the same thoughts, then it's going to be hard to find that innovation and creativity."



EXAMPLES OF UNIQUE GROUP EXPERIENCES AT FOUR SEASONS HOTELS AND RESORTS

According to Sicroff, the growing diversity of ages and interests among those visiting Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts as part of corporate group programs is one of the trends impacting how the hotels' conference services teams are reconfiguring event venues and redesigning event experiences.

"Millennial event attendees want more organic experiences, and they want to choose what they do and when," he explains. "They also often want to be the first among their friends to experience new things and share those moments through social media."

Therefore, there's growing demand for programs that integrate share-worthy moments into event agendas. Here are some examples of non-traditional event venues and experiences at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts:

1**Four Seasons Hotel Kyoto:**

Available for private group rental, the traditional Japanese "Shakusui-tei" Tea House sits next to an 800-year old pond garden. This makes it an ideal setting to experience a traditional tea ceremony while learning about the tea ceremony's role in Japanese culture. Planners can also opt for an evening of "Ozashiki Asobi" entertainment with English-speaking geishas.

2**Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo:**

The residential villas, located at the highest points of the peninsula overlooking the Pacific, include The Casa del Cielo. The 6,700 square foot home has extensive outdoor living space, a heated infinity pool, and a full kitchen. These homes are not accessible to most leisure guests due to their size and amenities, but groups can book one or several to use as a base camp throughout their program. The villas also serve as breathtaking backdrops for exclusive dinners and receptions.

3**Four Seasons Resort Lanai:**

The property's horse stables can be configured to host group dinners and cocktail events between the stalls, while local historian Kepa Maly regales attendees with stories about local ancestral culture.

4**Four Seasons Hotel Denver:**

Recently the hotel put on a "classy to trashy event". Elegant cocktails and canapes were first served in the hotel's luxury penthouse. Then attendees were blindfolded and escorted down the back elevator to the property's loading deck where they were welcomed by graffiti and tattoo artists for dinner at the Budweiser "Bud & Burgers" trailer.

HOTEL BUYOUTS PROVIDE THE ULTIMATE CUSTOMIZED EVENTS AND ROI

The best way for an event planner to fully customize a luxury program is a complete hotel takeover. That provides a wider variety of meeting design scenarios for companies to create one-of-a-kind events with maximum freedom to utilize all or the majority of the hotel property.

Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts recently formalized that process by launching a new initiative for corporate group takeovers, called: [“Extraordinary Exclusives and Buyouts.”](#)

“We’re in the business of making memorable experiences for our group clients,” says Sicoff. “When we open up entire properties exclusively for one client’s use, it results in a world of benefits for both hosts and participants. After a group experiences an Exclusive or Buyout, it’s hard for them to go back to sharing a property with others.”

Richard A. Calcaterra, Co-founder and Officer of [Enterprise Events Group](#), adds that there is nothing more appealing than a hotel buyout from the buyer side. “Meeting planners are judged by our clients on creativity, flexibility, and our ability to maximise marketing opportunities. When you have a property on an exclusive basis, it opens so many possibilities to execute top tier events.”





CITIES PROMOTE NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL CULTURE TO EVENT PLANNERS

Tourism and convention bureaus worldwide are positioning their cities as a network of neighborhoods with distinct individual identities, versus a homogenous whole, in an effort to connect with different traveler segments on a more personalized level. Bureaus are promoting their neighborhoods by developing prominent online maps linking to content that segments and showcases the unique attributes of their major communities.

This shift toward entire cities marketing their neighborhood experiences illustrates the demand among travelers — at scale — for engaging with local communities and their residents. Some bureaus, including San Francisco Travel and Los Angeles Tourism, are diversifying that strategy to also target the meetings industry.

In the last year, San Francisco Travel launched its Neighborhood Network Connections and SFMeetCulture online platforms to connect meeting planners with local thought leaders and cultural influencers.

“We have a meetings advisory council and part of their feedback is that San Francisco has such a rich environment, and our neighborhoods really do resonate with meeting planners too,” says LaLene Shepherd, manager, sales and trade marketing at San Francisco Travel. “So we created the Neighborhood Network Connections to make it easier to plan meetings when you’re looking at one of those neighborhoods that’s interesting for your group, and everything that’s specific to them.”

The Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board just launched its Virtual Discovery L.A. portal with more than 50 event spaces showcased in immersive VR and 360-degree video. The platform takes viewers on neighborhood tours to scope out the outdoor cafes in Hollywood Farmer’s Market and the Tiffany store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, among others. The portal builds on the success of the new Meet L.A. website that launched last year, designed primarily to differentiate the city’s many individual neighborhoods.

“Our goal was to make L.A. a little more reachable where you can get your arms around it,” says Darren Green, senior VP of sales at Meet L.A. “We listened to our customer advisory board about different tools that they’d like to see, and what would make their lives easier. They constantly came back that L.A. is so big that, ‘I don’t know where to start.’ So we took that to our board of directors and said we’d like to launch this platform just so planners can get comfortable with our city.”

LUXURY HOTELS ARE EVOLVING AS LOCAL COMMUNITY PORTALS FOR EVENT PLANNERS

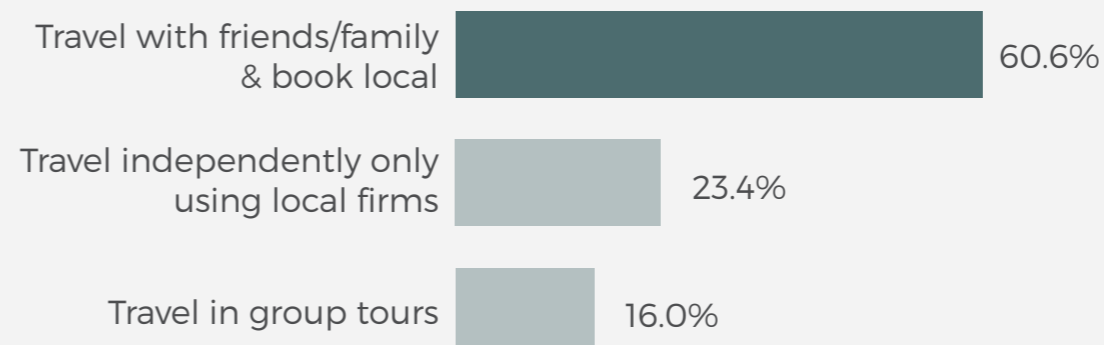
Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts was the first large hotel group to invest significantly in online destination content to provide context around the on-property amenities, back when it relaunched FourSeasons.com in 2012.

That marked a shift among the luxury hospitality companies to engage their guests during the travel dream and research phases with compelling content showcasing the local communities around the properties. That evolved into the online [Four Seasons Extraordinary Experiences](#) storytelling, delving deeper into the nuance of different opportunities for guest engagement within the local destinations.

Meeting planners have always looked for ways to incorporate aspects of local culture into their programs. A survey conducted by Google Consumer Surveys found a majority of respondents (61%) prefer booking local. Attendees are now demanding more immersive, authentic and unique experiences, and their company executives are demanding a stronger business case to support those experiences.

“Our properties really strive to engage their local communities, whether that’s on or off-property,” says Sicroff. “Specifically for our meeting groups, we always try to ensure the local experiences provide more elevated networking opportunities to deliver a higher return on investment.”

When booking your travels & tours, which do you prefer?



Methodology: Conducted by Google Consumer Surveys, May 08, 2014 - May 10, 2014 and based on 500 online responses.
Sample: National adult Internet population

EXAMPLES OF LOCAL INTEGRATION:

Horse whispering at Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore

Santa Barbara: Monty Roberts, the inspiration behind the Horse Whisperer, and his wife invite groups to their sprawling working ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley, 40 minutes from the resort. Monty draws direct comparisons to how people should interact with both horses and colleagues with patience and respect to achieve positive results.

Painting lessons at Four Seasons Resort Nevis: Recently a small incentive group rented Villa 1703 overlooking St. Kitts and the Caribbean Sea. Rosey Cameron, a local muralist with a gallery in St. Kitts, taught a painting class while explaining her creative process.

Four Seasons Resort Oahu at Ko Olina: Answering the demand for in-depth cultural experiences that also encourage outdoor fitness and foster teamwork, the property organizes outrigger canoe experiences inspired by the ancient sport of Hoe Wa'a. Traditional Hawaiian concepts of lokahi (agreement, cooperation and collaboration), and kakou (synergy) are first taught on land before the 6-person canoes are launched into the water right off the resort's beach.

Tango lessons at Four Seasons Hotel Buenos Aires: Most tourists visiting Buenos Aires seek out some kind of tango experience at shows all over the city. However, Four Seasons Hotel Buenos Aires provides an exclusive event in the 1920s Belle Epoque mansion on property. Tango lessons and demonstrations are led by dancers from the prestigious "Carlos Copello School."



THE FUTURE OF LUXURY TRAVEL IS SHIFTING TOWARD TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Customizing a consumer product to match a consumer psychographic is based on the [academic concept of self-congruity](#), which has long been established in industries from automotive to apparel. The simple premise is that people prefer to associate with products and services that align with their aspirational self-identity. That's how brands attempt to build long-term customer loyalty and [customer lifetime value](#).

Transformation, however, is a lofty concept. The root of the theme, as it applies here, is found in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Traditionally, the luxury hospitality industry marketed to luxury audiences primarily in relation to the second highest level of Maslow's famous pyramid: "Esteem," prioritizing prestige, status, exclusivity, and feelings of accomplishment. Since the dawn of travel, luxury hotel brands have delivered on that, and it was enough to satisfy most high-end travelers.

Because of rising competition, brands are now percolating toward the top level of Maslow's pyramid: "Self-actualization," referring to achieving one's full aspirational potential beyond status symbols, including creative expression.

Transformation, then, speaks directly to self-actualization. Certainly, some travel experiences are fully transformational, yet many are not, but this isn't an either/or proposition. Hotels might not provide an experience that wholly or radically changes guests' worldviews, or views of themselves, but they can provide the platform for guests to progress along their personal journey toward their individual ideals of transformation and self-actualization.





FOUR SEASONS
HOTELS AND RESORTS

YOUR FOUR SEASONS

With Extraordinary Exclusives and Buyouts, enjoy the freedom to transform an entire hotel or resort into your own private Four Seasons – creating the ultimate experience for meetings and incentives.

Explore the possibilities
[fourseasons.com](https://www.fourseasons.com)

EXECUTIVE LETTER

At Four Seasons, we believe that the greatest service we can provide our guests is to truly understand who they are and what they need, and to customise their experience accordingly. Doing so means hiring the most talented, passionate people in the industry – people who hold hospitality as a genuine personal value and who truly care for our guests.

This same philosophy defines our approach to meetings and incentives. Understanding the unique needs and objectives of each of our clients helps us deliver the innovative, one-of-a-kind event experiences for which Four Seasons is known the world over.

Across our portfolio, we continue to elevate the event experience – from reconceiving the design of our new hotels to providing strategic tools for planners and partnering with communities to create authentic local experiences. Our latest program, Extraordinary Exclusives and Buyouts, provides the ultimate Four Seasons experience for meetings and incentives, giving groups complete privacy, total access to amenities and services, and greater freedom in branding opportunities at the property.

Uniting all of these elements, of course, is our consistent standard of service excellence, delivered by our team of extraordinary people. This is what truly sets apart Four Seasons events.



Whatever your program requires, our hotels and resorts will be pleased to custom-design an exceptional experience.

Christian H. Clerc
President, Worldwide Hotel Operations
Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing Media, Insights & Marketing to key sectors of travel.

Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Mastercard, Hyatt, Adobe, Lyft, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email at skiftx@skift.com.

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