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# DIVERSITY UNDERGOES A RENOVATION

NEW TRENDS AND CHALLENGES ARE  
EMERGING IN THE **MEETINGS** INDUSTRY





By Natalie Compagno

**M**inority groups naturally come together to resist and mingle, and in so doing need a venue to congregate and discuss, to celebrate and bond. For some time now, the meetings and hospitality industry has provided a variety of safe, encouraging spaces for those who identify as minorities.

The meetings business is often in the vanguard of inclusion and tolerance for all people, regardless of race or orientation. Yet diversity within the workforce still is somewhat lacking. Unforeseen challenges arise, and for every step forward against discrimination, new issues emerge.

This year, the industry is sharply focused on proactive policies and new, forward-thinking offerings. President Donald Trump's administration has rolled out strict travel policies, keeping the industry on high alert to accommodate and inform clients.

Transgender equality and understanding, comfortable quiet spaces for breast-feeding women, and veterans' unique needs are becoming part of everyday vocabulary when it comes to event planning and preparation.

But being a truly diverse industry takes more than incorporating disenfranchised groups: It means being accepting of all people sincerely, and without exception.

How does the meetings and events industry achieve this? A first step is to make diversity a priority in mottoes and verbiage. After all, words are powerful. A next step is to take action. Destinations must project an open-minded and inclusive image in order to attract event planners and meeting groups.

Here's a look at how some top destinations, venues and organizations have responded to the growing call for diversity.





#### NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans has always been a destination that celebrates differences. Many leaders in the city's tourism industry are fighting against proposed discriminatory legislation in the state, and promoting equality for all, regardless of nationality, religion, sexual orientation or any other criteria.

The Crescent City is a melting pot, influenced by African, French, Spanish, Acadian, Creole, British, Irish, Vietnamese and many other cultures. All travelers who pass through the port city leave their mark. Its tolerance and hospitality have made it a world-class destination for decades, and enable it to maximize its tourism potential.

When the NBA chose to move the 2017 All-Star Weekend from Charlotte, North Carolina, due to diversity issues, it picked New Orleans to be the host. The Big Easy also greets a diverse set of annual meetings, including American Immigration Lawyers Association, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, National Black Nurses Association and the Annual Essence Festival.

New Orleans' support for the LGBT community is well-known, and is one of the things that make visiting the city so pleasurable and comfortable for visitors of all stripes. It's reassuring to know that everyone is welcomed with open arms.

#### NORTHEAST FLORIDA

Northeast Florida's historic coast has also been a leader in welcoming diversity. Its rich Colonial and African-American civil rights history attracts visitors from all over. The region encourages business from all groups, which helped make it a top destination for gay and lesbian weddings.

"We have definitely seen growth in the number of diverse groups in recent years," says Jaya Larkin Dillard, sales and services manager for **St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors & Convention Bureau**. "The legalization of gay marriages in Florida in 2015 was a boon to same-sex weddings in our romantic city.

"We are putting more resources into this arena, with membership in IGLTA [International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association] and the growing list of diversity conferences and trade shows we attend."

#### CARIBBEAN

According to Caribbean Tourism Organization, despite political, security, and economic uncertainties and challenges in the main source markets, tourist and group arrivals to the Caribbean increased by 4.2 percent in 2016. The Caribbean is a popular destination among travelers, but not only for the beautiful weather and beaches: It also boasts a diversity of culture that is second to none.

Trinidad is becoming increasingly popular because of its massive Carnival, which lures revelers from all over the world each year. Hyatt Regency Trinidad hosts a diverse audience, from Carnival-goers to vacationers to meeting attendees.

"This year promises to bring change to the global hotel industry," says General Manager Russell George. "The recent shake-up in government and politics in major markets directly affects the global hospitality industry, thus shaping travel trends."

George feels that the variety of guests Hyatt Regency Trinidad receives pushes his team to make everyone feel as if they are catered to specifically, honoring their unique needs and personality.

Curacao is a famously diverse destination known for its unofficial slogan, "Live and Let Live." Its population is a mix of almost 60 nationalities of Latin, European and African ancestry. An important Jewish monument, Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, is the oldest continuously operating synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, drawing many visitors and historians each year.

This deep foundation of religious tolerance and overall acceptance has made Curacao a desired group locale. It is also one of the most LGBT-friendly destinations in the Caribbean. Curacao's Pride Week is back for the fifth year in a row in 2017, with rainbow flags flying over Willemstad to welcome everyone.

#### MINNEAPOLIS

Sun-kissed tropical islands aren't the only locales embracing the diversity mantra. **Radisson Blu Mall of America**, the only hotel connected to Mall of America, welcomes a plethora of guests from other countries with various cultural and religious backgrounds. The Radisson Blu motto "Yes, I

**"This year promises to bring change to the global hotel industry."**

—Russell George,  
general manager of  
Hyatt Regency Trinidad

#### FIRST AND FABULOUS

While some hospitality groups play catch-up in embracing people's differences, others have been emphasizing them for years. Hard Rock Hotels, Casinos and Cates have been advocating acceptance for five decades.



"Since the first cafe opened in 1971, the brand has maintained its mantra, to 'Love All, Serve All,' throughout its worldwide network of Hard Rock properties," says Greg Naylor, director of worldwide sales.

Nowhere is that more apparent than **Hard Rock Hotel Palm Springs** (photo above), which opened in 2013. Set in the heart of bustling downtown Palm Springs, the hotel serves as a valuable nexus for the city's thriving LGBTQ community and guests. With 163 guest rooms and suites, and 30,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, the hotel hosts diverse groups of all shapes and sizes.

"We greatly support and value the LGBTQ community, and even host a weekly drag brunch every Sunday morning at the property, which has proven to be wildly popular," Naylor says. Other big events on the calendar include hosting International Bear Convergence and the iconic LPGA Dinah Shore golf tournament.

Overall, the brand is founded on the ideas of shattering social class barriers and treating all with dignity and respect. Naylor says the diversity within Hard Rock is a key influence.

"We are owned by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and music is in our DNA, which is the global common thread to us all," Naylor says. "I don't think there is another competitor as committed to diversity as Hard Rock Hotels."