

THE NEW LONG BEACH The historic harbor city gets a modern, event-ready makeover

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# DESTINATION

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## THE REINVENTION OF LONG BEACH

An expanded convention center and attractive new meeting venues have transformed this iconic harbor city. BY MARTHA BURR

SITTING MIDWAY BETWEEN LOS ANGELES AND SAN DIEGO, the historic SoCal port city of Long Beach offers an easygoing charm and walkability, along with a year-round Mediterranean climate. These qualities have long made the city an attractive destination for meeting planners. Now, there's even more to love.

The recent \$180 million spent revamping the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center and the Long Beach Airport have brought a sea of change. With a fully updated infrastructure, design and technology, Long Beach is hosting events as diverse as the Toyota Grand Prix, Long Beach Jazz Festival and the annual TED Conference.

There are more than 5,000 hotel rooms available citywide. Many properties have harbor vistas and oceanfront venues, along with everything you need for seamless event planning. More than \$60 million has been spent to upgrade facilities at four of the city's largest hotels alone.

A picturesque harbor, 5 miles of sandy beaches, stylish restaurants and a vibrant downtown center add to the city's appeal. Greg Jenkins, a partner at Bravo Productions, an award-winning, full-service event planning and production company, says he would choose Long Beach even if it wasn't the city he calls home. "I've lived in Long Beach for 30 years, and I love to do events here," he says. "There's a great mix of arts, history and culture. The city has also evolved a lot over the years, and the restaurants, hotels, convention center and airport are all really incredible today."

The Long Beach Convention Center's Bogart & Co. is an inviting new restaurant for private parties, receptions and quick bites during trade shows.



PHOTO COURTESY OF: LONG BEACH CVB, THE QUEEN MARY, LUMINAIRE IMAGES.



Left: The luxury liner *Queen Mary* features a striking event space. Below: The Long Beach Museum of Art overlooks the harbor from a bluff.



## A 21st-Century Convention Center

In November, the \$40 million renovation of the **Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center** was completed, and the complex emerged shiny and gleaming with a sophisticated 21st-century look.

A glass concourse and lobby offer gorgeous waterfront views, while the outdoor walkway lets visitors enjoy sunshine and sea air as they move between sites. The center has 400,000 square feet of flexible exhibit and meeting space, two theaters, an arena and 34 meeting rooms. The Terrace Theater seats 3,051, features a glass-walled lobby with a fountain view, and has aisle-free continental seating. The theater's plaza was relandscaped with a new tropical garden ideal for outdoor events. The entire convention center has updated wiring and free Wi-Fi in all public areas.

Despite its vast size, the convention center still has an intimate environment. Megan Rodriguez, public relations manager of the Long Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, notes that the revamp was greatly influenced by the TED residency there. "We created stylish, warm spaces for social networking," she explains, "almost mini-meeting pods with a lounge-type feel, where attendees can sit and talk, relax, catch up on their email and recharge—all without leaving the venue."

The convention center's architects and designers also took a close look at the complex's 50-year-old Long Beach Arena and breathed new life into it, using the space to create a \$10 million innovative loft-style ballroom. The Pacific Ballroom uses a unique movable grid system that allows planners to reconfigure the 45,000-square-foot space almost

instantly. With little effort, the highly adaptable venue can be transformed from a concert, ice show, conference or banquet room for 5,500 guests into a welcoming environment for smaller dinners or receptions.

The floating grid drops down, encircled by floor-to-ceiling curtain walls to hide the arena seats; colorful designs or logos can be projected on these vertical surfaces. The best part: Planners can save on expenses because of the facility's \$1.6 million all-inclusive, state-of-the-art lighting, sound and video system, which is all controlled with the simple touch of an iPad. Companies that recently held events there include Ingram Micro and Nerium.

## One-of-a-Kind Venues

It would be hard to find an event space more dazzling and sophisticated than the *Queen Mary*, a floating hotel and venue. The elegant 1936 art deco ship was retired from the Cunard Line after 31 years of transatlantic voyages and has since become one of Long Beach's biggest draws. While the Queen's Salon features golden onyx fireplaces and stunning period artwork, the ship has also been updated with the latest technology throughout. The luxury liner is enormous, with more than 80,000 square feet of functional meeting and exhibit space and 14 sleek art deco salons. Accommodations include 346 original first-class staterooms and suites. The *Queen Mary's* banquet department can host groups from 10 to 2,500.

Adjacent to the ship is the Queen Mary Dome, the onetime home of Howard Hughes' Spruce Goose. It has 135,300 square feet of space, 130-foot ceilings and a capacity of up to 2,160 guests.

# DESTINATION

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Top left: Perched on the harbor and connected to the convention center, the Hyatt Regency offers both views and convenience. Bottom left: The Sky Room supper club once hosted Elizabeth Taylor and Cary Grant. Above: Guests can dine under a whale at the aquarium.

Another waterfront draw is the **Aquarium of the Pacific**, a venue that's especially dramatic at night. A favorite spot for corporate holiday parties, guests can sip cocktails or enjoy a seated dinner beneath a giant whale or next to glowing jellyfish.

If you're looking for a smaller scale, the **Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden** offers a secluded and private setting for more intimate functions. The 1.3-acre garden features a koi pond, an arched bridge, trees, waterfalls and the lovely Friends Garden tent (capacity 80).

A few miles away, the **Long Beach Museum of Art**, which sits atop a bluff overlooking Long Beach Harbor, hosts small- to medium-size functions. The campus includes the historic Elizabeth Milbank Anderson house and 1912 carriage house, oceanfront gardens and a new pavilion with two floors of expansive gallery space.

## Deluxe, Boutique and Stylish Hotels

Across the street from the convention center, the waterfront **Westin Long Beach** recently completed a \$12 million renovation to refresh its 469 guest rooms and 37,000 square feet of meeting space. Bravo Productions' Jenkins chose the Westin for a Boeing VIP luncheon with 100 guests. "It was themed Renaissance Repast, and we brought in art-

work, rugs, furniture, statues, lamps—all to create an early Renaissance environment," he says. "It was very dramatic."

The **Hyatt Regency**, which recently spent \$30 million on renovations, is perched on the harbor and connected to the convention center. Offering spectacular ocean views, the hotel has 528 updated guest rooms and more than 33,000 square feet of function space, including Long Beach's only waterfront ballroom. Within walking distance of the convention center is Marriott's **Courtyard Long Beach Downtown**, with 216 rooms and 7,000 square feet of meeting space.

Across the harbor from downtown Long Beach is the waterfront **Hotel Maya, a DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel**. The pet-friendly resort boasts Latin-America-meets-California style throughout its lush gardens, floating pool cabanas and 199 guest rooms spread across five buildings, all refreshed after a \$20 million renovation. The resort's 11 acres include tennis and bocce balls courts, and 30,000 square feet of flexible indoor and outdoor meeting space.

Near the Long Beach Airport, the 307-room **Long Beach Marriott** recently underwent a \$10 million renovation of public areas and meeting rooms, and added an additional 1,700 square feet of outdoor event space. Nearby, the **Courtyard Long Beach Airport** opened last year,

PHOTO COURTESY OF: LINDSEY CAHILL PHOTOGRAPHY, MARK KNIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY, AQUARIUM OF THE PACIFIC, DDR CORP.

sporting California style and advanced technology, with 159 rooms and more than 2,000 square feet of meeting space.

### Eat, Drink and Be Merry

Long Beach restaurants are varied and plentiful. The dramatic art deco supper club **Sky Room** is located at the top of the historic Breakers Hotel, built in 1926 and operated as the first West Coast Hilton. The restaurant once hosted celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor and Cary Grant. Restored in 1998, its 360-degree views of ocean and skyline are a spectacular backdrop for banquets and receptions. The venue's Empire Grand Ballroom boasts vaulted ceilings, mirrored columns and crystal chandeliers, with a capacity of 220 for a seated dinner and 350 for cocktail receptions. **Beachwood BBQ & Brewing** is part of the Promenade, downtown's lively new dining destination. It's a stylish gastropub with a terrific selection of craft beers alongside top-notch fare like duck confit tater tots, crawfish bread and smoked barbecue. There's an on-site brewery and a sprawling patio.

**Gladstone's Long Beach** sits on the waterfront, between the aquarium and the convention center, with glorious views of the harbor and the *Queen Mary*, especially from the salt-air patio. The menu includes oysters, ahi poke, crab cakes and lobster, and it's event-friendly for either buyout or customizable dining rooms, with a maximum capacity of 425 people.

**La Traviata** is an elegant Italian restaurant in downtown Long Beach with live entertainment that ranges from jazz to flamenco. It can host events including small cocktail gatherings and larger buyouts.

### Sun, Shops, Sand and Surf

The weather is almost always perfect in Long Beach, and there are plenty of outdoor activities people can do on their own, as well as opportunities for customized group outings. Ocean sports include

surfing, kayaking, Jet Skis and boating. Landlubbers can explore scenic Belmont Shore on bikes or roll-blades or hit the sand. At the festive **Shoreline Village**, visitors can stroll, nosh on funnel cakes or fudge or take a ride on the carousel.

**The Pike at Rainbow Harbor** is a sprawling waterfront entertainment district in downtown Long Beach, between the convention center and Aquarium of the Pacific. Along with being an open-air marketplace, it's home to the 130-foot historic schooner *American Pride*, which is available for private charters, a specialized corporate team-building sailing experience and catered parties for up to 100. Venues for outdoor events include Rhythm Park, which can accommodate up to 550 guests for seated dinners, 650 for receptions; sponsor logos can be illuminated on an adjoining wall.

Pike Lawn is a spacious, verdant location for company barbecues, cocktail parties or themed dinners with a capacity of up to 2,200. The Ultra Lounge, holding 200 to 400 people, is perched on an upper level of the marketplace with a lively backdrop of palm trees, a Ferris wheel and ocean views.

Finally, it's easier than ever to get in and out of town. The **Long Beach Airport**, with its easy parking and short security lines, has preserved its 1930s art deco mosaics, while a \$140 million renovation has added 74,000 square feet of new construction and updated gates, concourses, lounges and restaurants. An atrium, with native plant garden, outdoor seating and fire pits, has the feel of a resort hotel, and passengers can sip cocktails on the patio while waiting for their flight. From landing to wheels up, planning events in Long Beach is a sea-scented breeze! 🌊



The Pike at Rainbow Harbor includes the upper-level Ultra Lounge, capacity 400.

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