



Remember the Alamo City

San Antonio celebrates its 300th anniversary with a slew of new offerings sure to entice planners.

BY JENNIFER BARGER

→ Founded by the Spaniards in 1718 and embedded in memory thanks to the Battle of the Alamo in 1836, San Antonio justifiably earns its rep as an old, storied place. But as the city celebrates its tricentennial this year, planners will find a Texas-size list of new reasons it's ideal for events and meetings. "Our tricentennial is showcasing our history, culture and unique atmosphere, which can build excitement and attendance," says Visit San Antonio President and CEO Casandra Matej, CDME. "Plus, planners will benefit from the many recent renovations and expansions that have taken place in time for it." Here are some of the highlights.

VISIT SAN ANTONIO

Conventional Wisdom

Reopened in 2016 after a dramatic, \$325 million expansion, Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center now sports 514,000 square feet of contiguous exhibit space, more than 70 meeting rooms and the largest ballroom in Texas, the 54,000-sq.-ft. Stars at Night Ballroom. The latter features a yeehaw-inducing ceiling with LED stars meant to replicate the state's dramatic evening skies. It's all a quick stroll from one of the city's top attractions, the River Walk, with its restaurants, boats and bustle. "The River Walk is fondly known as the 'World's Largest Hotel Lobby' because it encourages people to get outdoors and network with one another," says Matej.

Hotel Groundswell

The Alamo City boasts more than 14,000 downtown hotel rooms. Among its newer or updated offerings: The St. Anthony, a 1909 neoclassical gem, which was restored and renewed in 2015. Now amid repolished marble, a gilded piano Billy Joel once played and a stellar rooftop pool, meeting-goers can relax between sessions or events in spaces like the Anacacho Ballroom with its neoclassical column or on the 10th-floor Sky Terrace with vistas of downtown.

In the hip, redeveloped Pearl district on the extended Museum Reach section of the River Walk, Hotel Emma elegantly occupies the 1894 former brewhouse of the onetime Pearl Brewery. On tap: 146 plush, retro-cool guest rooms and event spaces like the Elephant Cellar, where jumbo metal brew tanks and 19-foot ceilings set an impressive scene for up to 240 guests. The surrounding Pearl complex also includes venues in revived vintage buildings like the Pearl Stable, a circular structure where the brewery's horses once grazed, which can now hold 300 to 400 attendees for meetings or parties.

Traditions Revived

Many of the city's most established attractions have also been revved up or sized up in time for the 300th anniversary. "The Witte Museum recently underwent a dramatic renovation and expansion," says Matej. "The natural and Texas history museum now offer dynamic new exhibits including the Naylor Family Dinosaur Gallery as well as the Mays Family Center, with 10,000 square feet of meeting space with a panorama of the river."

The San Antonio Botanical Garden, long popular for its natural plantings and futuristic conservatories, just added 8 acres to its green space, meaning planners can host events in spaces like the historic Auld House; a dramatic courtyard between the glass conservatories; or in the bright, open demonstration kitchen. The latter, surrounded by plots of herbs and veggies, can accommodate innovative events like a "cocktail scavenger hunt" where attendees pick the ingredients for drinks they learn to mix.

Love Boats?

Rowboats, paddle crafts and barges have all plied the San Antonio River Walk since it was built in the early 20th century. Since last fall, Go Rio's new electrically powered barges have traveled the waterway, flashing their brightly colored, pierced metal designs inspired by papel picado (those traditional Mexican decorative banners hanging all over town). They can be rented for dinners of up to 20 people. Local restaurants—including Mediterranean-meets-Southwestern Biga on the Banks and Texas bistro Boudro's—do the catering, leaving attendees to wonder whether they are in Venice.

Star Quality

Most nights of the year, downtown's Tobin Center for the Performing Arts dazzles with big-name comedy acts, symphony concerts or gigs by bands like Fleet Foxes. But the theater, built in 2014 and incorporating portions of the Spanish Revival 1926 Municipal Auditorium, also wins rave reviews as a meeting venue for up to 3,000 guests. Lobbies and an outdoor terrace on the River Walk appeal to a variety of groups, but the largest and most impressive spot is the main H-E-B Performance Hall, where an ingenious system allows rows of seats to fold down to create a flat floor for dinners or receptions.