

# SWAN OR DOLPHIN?

By Mary Welch

Come on, you know the phrase: “I’m going to Disney World.” Orlando has been luring businesses, as well as families, to the Magic Kingdom for decades. After all, Disney is more than a Mouse Empire—it’s a business. Big business.



Photography courtesy of Swan & Dolphin Media

In fact, the Orlando Convention & Visitors Bureau spent \$41 million last year enticing conventioners to its city, according to *Tradeshows Week*. And it’s working. Last year, the city overtook Chicago in hosting the second largest number of top trade shows and now lags only behind Las Vegas. Orlando boasted 26 major shows while Atlanta reined in 11. In terms of square footage used by those conventions, Orlando’s conventions used 7.6 million square feet of hotel and convention

space versus Atlanta’s 3.1 million.

If you think (and fear) that having a business meeting at a Walt Disney World Resort address might include spilled sippy cups, giant foam rubber-headed elves lurking in the lobby and squealing 6-year-olds stampeding down the corridors, you should think again.

You can have a grown-up meeting experience at the Magic Kingdom. Take the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin, for example. As recipient of

the prestigious Meetings & Conventions Hall of Fame Award, the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin is a nationally respected and recognized leader in the convention resort arena.

The hotels work as one, although the Swan is a 750-room boutique managed by the Westin Hotel, while the Dolphin is the larger (and more kid-friendly) Sheraton. Overall, the hotel boasts 2,265 guest rooms and more than 329,000 square feet of meeting space, including 84 meeting rooms,



two executive boardrooms, four ballroom options, 110,500 square feet of contiguous convention/exhibit space, outdoor function areas and two fully equipped business centers.

“We are the largest meeting hotel on the Disney property with 329,000 square feet of meeting and exhibit space and we offer all the latest bells and whistles that meetings require,” says Eric Opron, director of sales and marketing. “But because we are on the Disney property, we are able to incorporate the benefits the Disney offers to the hotels it owns. Conventions can take advantage of as much – or as little – of the Disney benefits.”

### Among those Disney perks are:

- Complimentary transportation to all Walt Disney World theme parks and attractions
- Extended hours at theme parks for those staying at Disney-owned hotels
- On-site Disney ticket desk
- Advance tee times on five nearby championship Walt Disney World golf courses
- Access to the Disney Institute, an executive learning program that covers such topics as brand development (a concept Disney practically invented).

As any city’s convention executive will attest, the key to bringing more convention dollars to a city is to entice attendees to stay a day or two before or after the meeting and maybe even bring the family along. Orlando and the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin do well on this score. According to Opron, a whopping 75 percent of all conventioners at the hotel spend a few extra days enjoying the area’s various theme parks, as well as the hotel’s Heavenly Bed®, 17 spectacular restaurants

and lounges and full-service pampering facility, the Mandara Spa. In addition, the resort offers five swimming pools, including a three-acre grotto pool, a white sand beach, four lighted tennis courts and jogging trails. At night, from our balcony, we could see the Epcot Center fireworks.

There also are two restaurants of note: Shula’s, a steak house owned by the legendary NFL coach Don Shula, and Bluezoo, an extraordinary seafood experience by celebrity Chef Todd English. In addition, we feasted on artfully prepared sushi at Kimonos; enjoyed the cafeteria-style dining of Picabu, which offered reasonably priced meals; and ate in a casual setting at The Fountain, a Johnny Rockets’-style restaurant of burgers, hot dogs and ice cream.

“There was a challenge a few years ago where many convention and meeting

planners felt they had brought their group here and there wasn’t anything new for them,” admits Opron. “But that’s changed. There are more adult activities, more restaurants headed by celebrity chefs, such as Todd English and Emeril. We opened our spa, which stays open until 9 p.m. so that a couple can enjoy a spa treatment or couples’ massage after a day of going to the resorts or playing golf.”

But he’s also quick to add the advantages of being in the arms of Disney’s magic. “You know, everyone has a Disney memory that makes them happy. It could be watching Annette and Cubby on the *Mickey Mouse Club*, or *Lilo and Stitch*, or the *Little Mermaid* a few years back to *Pirates of the Caribbean* today. Everyone has a Disney memory.”

Orlando and the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin are counting on that. ♡

