

FEATURES

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A-List All-Inclusives

The best places for meetings in Mexico and the Caribbean

By Jonathan Vatner



Taking the all-inclusive plunge can be a scary decision for a planner. Pay-one-price resorts generally are not thought of as meetings destinations, and a perception persists that they are not equipped for special events or gourmet meals.

But don't let that image sway you, advises Nancy Larson, senior buyer, meetings and events, for Minneapolis-based Carlson Marketing. "They have changed from the old image of all-inclusives," she says. "Now they have lots of restaurants and activities. It's much more deluxe."

Though only a portion of all-inclusive resorts cater to meetings and incentives, the ones that do can be better choices than European-plan properties. Because the rate includes meals, drinks, and at least a portion of meeting and banqueting costs, planners almost always will find a savings when bringing groups to these properties.

M&C asked the top all-inclusive resort companies which of their properties were best for meetings and incentives in Mexico and the Caribbean. Following are their recommendations.

**Barcelo Riviera Maya
Beach Resort in Mexico**

Barcelo Riviera Maya Beach Resort

Riviera Maya, Mexico
(866) 853-5720; www.barcelo.com

Resort overview: This resort really is a complex of four properties in one, comprising more than 1,900 rooms. The most upscale of the four, the Barcelo—Maya Tropical Beach Hotel and the Barcelo Maya Colonial Beach Hotel, each with 474 rooms, opened in 2006.

Surprise inclusion: Free scuba diving lesson

Why it's great for groups: The resort complex features a new freestanding convention center accommodating up to 850 attendees. It includes a 12,000-square-foot ballroom, five meeting rooms and a business center. More importantly, it has a staff that bends over backward for groups, says Margaret



Miguel, events coordinator for Optometric Services Inc., in Montreal. She recently brought a 160-person meeting of equipment buyers to the property, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. "The personnel, down to the last bellboy and chambermaid, were unfailingly polite and willing to go the extra mile for absolutely no incentive whatsoever." Miguel's attendees appreciated the new conference center, as well: "It's very airy, and the acoustics were good."

Recent news: The 756-room Barcelo Maya Palace Hotel, the fifth property in the complex, is under construction, to open late this year.

**Incentive-worthy:
Grand Lido Negril
in Jamaica**

Grand Lido Negril

Negril, Jamaica
(800) 467-8737; www.superclubs.com

Resort overview: The 210-room property features a 3,600-square-foot meeting room for up to 200 guests. Children under 16 are not permitted.

Surprise inclusions: Manicures and pedicures; dry cleaning

Why it's great for groups: According to Shari Wallack, president of Buy The Sea, a group travel buyer based in Plantation, Fla., the property is perfect for an incentive group, ranging from just a few attendees to a complete buyout. "It is probably the friendliest property and the most service-oriented," she says. "It makes a huge difference when you're bringing a program there." Wallack adds that private functions are creative and well executed, although the surcharge for special events is perhaps more than other all-inclusives would ask for.

Wallack notes that it might not be the perfect property for meetings (as opposed to incentives), because the resort is an hour away from the airport. Groups that have loved it most have been those that traditionally went on upscale (but not luxury) cruises, she says.

Recent news: Breezes Runaway Bay, another SuperClubs property in Jamaica, completed a \$20 million renovation and expansion last December, adding new restaurants and pools, and bringing the number of rooms to 266.

CHOOSING AN ALL-INCLUSIVE

Would an all-inclusive be right for your group? Nancy Larson, senior buyer, meetings and events, for Minneapolis-based Carlson Marketing, offers the following advice.

Not for business meetings. "If you go to an all-inclusive or on a cruise, I think it's such a waste to spend your time in meetings."



Moon Palace

Cancun, Mexico
(011) 52-998-881-6000

www.palace

resorts.com

Resort overview: With 2,103 rooms and 150,000 square feet of meeting space, Moon Palace is more of a small town than any sort of palace. The resort offers tennis, mini golf and free room service. Golf and spa are on property (for an additional charge). "It's a gorgeous golf course," says Shari Wallack of Buy The Sea. "You can go sightseeing on it."

Surprise inclusion: Free meeting setup and private events (unless they're on the beach)

Why it's great for groups: The meeting space includes a 28,000-square-foot ballroom with a 30-foot ceiling, plus 70 breakout rooms. Meetings and events are handled completely in-house, and the conference services department is very experienced at meetings, according to Ginny Davito, vice president of group and incentive sales for Palace Resorts.

"It's great for really large groups, but a small group is totally going to get lost," cautions Wallack. "They're good about making it work for the masses."

Recent news: In February, the 601-room Cancun Palace reopened, fully renovated after Hurricane Wilma. The property has a new 600-seat amphitheater and 17,000 square feet of meeting space. The 287-room Beach Palace reopens in June with a new spa.

A second Moon Palace opens in 2008, in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, with 1,743 rooms, a spa with 54 treatment rooms, and 60,000 square feet of meeting space.

Group-friendly:
Iberostar Maya
in Playa Paraiso, Mexico

Iberostar Maya
Playa Paraiso, Mexico
(011) 52-984-877-2800
www.iberostar.com

Consider these venues for incentive trips only.

Not for VIPs. All-inclusives are not ideal for "superdeluxe, well-traveled people," says Larson. She has seen tire companies and other automotive clients, as well as chemical companies, choose all-inclusive incentive programs.

Some of Larson's favorites:

Grand Velas in Puerto Vallarta: "It's very over-the-top. It's the cream of the crop as far as ones we've used."

Grand Lido Negril, Jamaica: "We did an event there, and it was very well received."

Occidental Grand Flamenco Xcaret and Secrets Capri, both in the Riviera Maya. -- J.V.

Resort overview: The resort complex is composed of four properties in the Riviera Maya, near Playa del Carmen. A total of 1,692 rooms surround a convention center that holds up to 1,000 attendees. Adjacent is the 18-hole Playa Paraiso Golf Club, which is available at a discount to guests. A spa on property offers exotic treatments, including a Mexican sweat lodge ritual and an underwater massage, also for an additional charge.

Surprise inclusion: Dining at any of 16 restaurants on all four properties

Why it's great for groups: The center is quite large, comprising a 15,700-square-foot exhibit hall/ballroom and eight small meeting rooms for 11 people each. The facility has basic A/V capabilities, including video projection, closed-circuit television and 42-inch plasma TVs.

"They do a great job of decorating it for a minimal fee," says Sherri Goodwin, president of Summit Planners, based in Mishawaka, Ind. Be wary of high season, cautions Goodwin, as there's a seven-night minimum when booking a group through the resort at two of the properties during that period.

In the end, says Goodwin, "It's a superior first-class property. If you're looking for luxury, that would not be the property, and it's not a bargain basement. It's a good price for what you get."

Recent news: The 312-room Iberostar Grand Hotel Paraiso, which opened in March, is the fifth and most upscale resort in the complex. A 350-room Iberostar resort in Jamaica opens in May.

Occidental Grand Flamenco Xcaret

Riviera Maya, Mexico
(011) 52-984-871-5400
www.grandxcaret.com

Resort overview: This 769-room property is loaded with activities, from archery to water aerobics; also offered are spa services and a nearby golf course, both at an additional charge. For VIPs, the Royal Club is a group of rooms set aside from the rest of the resort, with private check-in and secretarial services.

Surprise inclusion: Admission to the neighboring Xcaret eco-adventure park

Why it's great for groups: The 11,000-square-foot convention center can accommodate up to 1,700 attendees and is easily divisible for smaller groups. "The meeting space was great," says Jennifer Pirtle, performance development project manager of Fired Up Inc., based in Austin, Texas, who brought 170 managers of the Johnny Carino's restaurant chain to the property for a conference in March 2006. She adds, "You always wonder with an all-inclusive what the food is going to be like, but it was very good, and the F&B director was wonderful." Private activities included a party in the beach club, and there was no surcharge.

Recent news: In Aruba, the Occidental Allegro property reopened last May as the 391-room Occidental Grand Aruba after a \$24 million renovation. Occidental also is planning four resorts for its luxury Royal Hideaway brand in the Americas, though details are not yet definite.



**Meetings-ready:
The Paradisus Palma Real**

in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic



Paradisus Palma

Punta Cana, Dominican Republic
(888) 336-3542
www.paradisuspalmareal.travel

Real

Resort overview: The 554-room Paradisus Palma Real opened a little more than a year ago on B+varo Beach. Punta Cana is a heavily leisure destination, but this property welcomes meetings. The resort offers unlimited free greens fees at the nearby Cocotal Golf & Country Club. There's also a spa and approximately 25,000 square feet of meeting space, which includes a 12,876-square-foot indoor amphitheater.

Surprise inclusions: Horseback riding and wine-tasting classes

Why it's great for groups: Not only does the resort have meeting space to spare, it features both golf and a spa, the two must-haves for high-end resorts. "For a group that's really into golf, there's a lot of opportunities in the area," says Bob Jacques, vice president of sales and training at AIT, an incentive house in City of Industry, Calif. Also, 102 of the suites feature Royal Service -- VIP treatment that includes butler service as well as private pool and beach areas.

Recent news: The 486-room Paradisus Puerto Rico will be reflagged as a Gran Melia on May 1. The property will be a bit more upscale but will be a la carte (blame it on the high cost of paying U.S. employees). The Paradisus Playa del Carmen opens this summer in Mexico.

**Sandals Royal
Bahamian Spa Resort,
Nassau, Bahamas**

Sandals Royal Bahamian Spa Resort

Nassau, Bahamas
(242) 327-6400; www.sandals.com

Resort overview: The 403-room resort offers all the typical all-inclusive amenities (large pool, bars and restaurants everywhere), plus a few more, most notably a private island just offshore, where guests can spend the day on the beach and even eat at an on-island restaurant. The Royal Bahamian has the most meeting space of any in the chain, at 11,500 square feet.

Surprise inclusion: Champagne in the minibar; two scuba dives per day

Why it's great for groups: Bob Jacques has used a number of Sandals properties for mid-tier incentives and has been pleased. Typically, the only events he plans are an opening night reception and a closing night dinner, and

the Royal Bahamian has areas set aside for such functions. A meetings-heavy group wouldn't do well at the property, he says, but it does have adequate space. "You don't want to have many meetings in these settings," he says, "but the group functions work out really well."

Planners familiar with the Sandals chain's couples-only rule should know that up to 10 percent of a group may be single travelers, and adult couples of any sexual orientation are permitted. Jacques says that on his trips, incentive winners bring whomever they want, even friends, and nobody bats an eye. Furthermore, he says, the adults-only rule actually can be a plus for his groups.

Recent news: The 193-room Sandals Grande Antigua Resort & Spa will open a \$70 million, 180-suite Mediterranean Village in June with 9,000 square feet of meeting space.

Sunset Jamaica Grande Resort & Spa

Ocho Rios, Jamaica

(800) 234-1707

www.sunsetjamaicagrande.com

Resort overview: The 730-room resort recently was rebranded from a Renaissance and given a propertywide renovation, which was completed in 2005. Among the upgraded facilities are five winding pools, a 1,300-foot beach and a new spa and fitness center, along with a small casino.

Surprise inclusion: Free Jamaican gifts for VIPs

Why it's great for groups: First off, it has 32,000 square feet of meeting space, much more than most planners would expect in the Caribbean. The 17,650-square-foot ballroom can comfortably handle up to 1,200 at rounds. Outdoor event space is plentiful, and the staff makes an effort to be amenable to large groups' requests.

Recent news: The upscale 65-room Sunset at the Palms in Negril (formerly Negril Cabins) also recently underwent a renovation.