

# Dateline: Reno, Nevada

By Matt Alderton

## Revitalized Reno Uses Sky Bridge, Savings In Bid For Groups

The “biggest little city in the world” will now feel even larger to groups thanks to a new sky bridge connecting the Atlantis Casino Resort Spa to the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. The bridge allows meeting planners to pair the hotel’s meeting facilities with the convention center’s for seamless access to nearly 550,000 square feet of cumulative meeting space, according to John Farahi, chairman and CEO of Monarch Casino & Resort, operator of the Atlantis.

“In most major cities, the hotels surrounding the convention center are connected to it by skywalk,” Farahi said. “By connecting to the convention center, we’ve given our guests something they’ve been wanting for years—a skywalk that makes two properties feel like one.”

Financed entirely by the hotel, the \$12.5 million Atlantis sky bridge opened in November after nine months of construction. At 18 feet wide, the bridge spans 650 feet and is outfitted with imported marble flooring, custom carpeting that was loomed in Ireland, and heat-strengthened, hurricane-resistant tinted glass windows through which pedestrians have views of the Sierra Nevada foothills to the east and Mt. Rose to the southwest.

“The sky bridge has placed the convention center among the top eight in the country with a direct connection between the convention center and hotel facilities,” said Ellen Oppenheim, president and CEO of the Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority. “It’s a very functional and attractive feature that gives meeting planners more flexibility. It even gives them extra space, because it’s possible to put exhibits along the sky bridge.”

While many cities have had to press pause on projects that would expand or enhance their hospitality infrastructure, Reno hasn’t, according to Oppenheim, who said the city has seen a dramatic increase in hospitality investments leading up

to and during the recession—of which the Atlantis sky bridge is only one.

“If you look at the investments made in the last handful of years, it’s close to \$2 billion that’s been invested in this destination,” Oppenheim said.



Reno’s sky bridge stretches from Atlantis to the convention center.

Several hotel expansions and renovations have recently been completed in Reno. In December, the 1,635-room Peppermill Hotel Casino opened a new \$400 million, 600-room all-suite hotel tower with a 30,000-sq.-ft. spa and a 62,000-sq.-ft. ballroom that is the largest in northern Nevada. The 1,995-room Grand Sierra Resort and Casino completed in February 2008 a \$90 million renovation of its guest rooms and public spaces, including a \$3.5 million makeover of its 200,000-sq.-ft. meeting and convention space. The 1,000-room Atlantis last year completed a \$50 million expansion that tripled the size of its spa and doubled the size of its meeting space to nearly 50,000 square feet on one side of the new sky bridge.

“The hotel product in Reno has really taken an enormous leap forward,” Oppenheim said, “which is a real positive for meeting planners.”

Also positive are a slew of civic improvements—including a new 9,100-seat Triple-A baseball stadium, the new 65,000-sq.-ft. National

Bowling Stadium, and the new, 32,655-sq.-ft. Reno Ballroom—that give meeting planners new and unique venues in which to host and entertain their attendees.

Even so, it’s Reno’s long-standing tradition as a value destination that has been driving demand among groups in a down economy, according to local meeting planners.

“Reno has always been a really savvy negotiator,” said Carey Bachman, former national sales manager at Reno’s Silver Legacy Resort & Casino and the current director of sales for Red Carpet Events & Design, a décor and destination management company. “We’ve always been aggressive because we’re a second-tier city that’s always been in the shadow of Las Vegas. Reno wants, needs and appreciates your business, so they’ll do whatever they can to get it.”

“Reno and Lake Tahoe have always been very flexible working with groups,” said Alayna Alariana, director of sales for Tahoe/Reno Experience, a local destination management company. “They’ve always been willing to negotiate rates to fit groups’ budgets whenever possible. Yes, they’re being asked to do it more right now, but Reno has always been very open to negotiating rates.”

According to Bachman, Reno hotels most commonly are negotiating meeting space upgrades, audio/visual discounts, guest room rebates, cash credits to planners’ master accounts, and suite upgrades, so that they can show off recent renovations. More coveted concessions, however—things like room rates and attrition clauses—are being negotiated less often because terms are already so favorable.

“Reno hotels have always offered really great room rates,” Bachman said. “Reno has always been really good with attrition, too. Many hotels don’t even have attrition—unless you’re booking a really large room block—which is incredible.” ○