

Databases selected: ProQuest Newspapers, ProQuest Central

Business: Meeting planners find parks fit bill: State-owned lodges offer affordability

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Abstract (Summary)

The tightening **economy** has prompted meeting planners to look to the state's Department of Natural Resources' park system for deals on lodges that can accommodate sales meetings, conventions and other corporate get-togethers. George T. Bagby, for example, offers "Breath of Fresh Air," a \$135-per-person-per-night corporate package that includes accommodations, food, a conference room and access to audiovisual equipment.

Full Text (556 words)

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For its fall meeting last year, EMCOR Services Aircond rolled out the carpet --- but it was not red.

The carpet led to the lodge at Unicoi State Park, a building that's more function than fancy. That was OK with organizers and officials of the Smyrna company, which specializes in keeping large buildings' engineering systems running smoothly.

"You're not going to get all the plush settings," said Heather Ray, Aircond's marketing manager and corporate meeting planner. She selected the Unicoi lodge for a meeting of 65 people and said "the economy of it" was a big factor.

The tightening economy has prompted meeting planners to look to the state's Department of Natural Resources' park system for deals on lodges that can accommodate sales meetings, conventions and other corporate get-togethers. State officials know it, too.

"We're focusing on marketing more on our lodges," said Kim Hatcher, DNR's public affairs coordinator for the division of State Parks & Historic Sites.

The division's Web site urges planners to consider seven buildings, scattered from the state to the coast, for their next meeting. In the mountains: Amicalola Falls State Park & Lodge, Smithgall Woods Conservation Area & Lodge, and Unicoi State Park & Lodge. Close to the mountains is Red Top Mountain State Park & Lodge, a 40-minute drive north of Atlanta on I-75.

Other facilities are George T. Bagby State Park & Lodge in southwest Georgia, Little Ocmulgee State Park & Lodge in south-central Georgia and Reynolds Mansion on Sapelo Island.

State officials have a reason to market their facilities, figures show. In the fiscal year that ended in July, conference room rental and food purchases totaled \$2.11 million. Analysts, blaming the economy, don't expect to match that amount this year.

Officials stress that their per-person rate for meetings is markedly lower than those offered by hotels or other places that rely on meeting and workshop trade. George T. Bagby, for example, offers "Breath of Fresh Air," a \$135-per-person-per-night corporate package that includes accommodations, food, a conference room and access to audiovisual equipment. That per-person rate could easily exceed \$200 elsewhere, said Ray.

Ann Godi, founder of Benchmarc360 Inc., a marketing and conference-planning corporation based in Atlanta, said lodges "might appeal to a narrow base of programs." Smaller meetings may work in a rustic setting, far from airports, she said. Larger gatherings call for bigger places, close to transportation hubs, she said.

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The lodge at Unicoi was fine with Steve Glass, executive director of the Georgia Society of Health-System Pharmacists. The nonprofit corporation numbers about 1,500 pharmacists who work primarily in hospitals and health maintenance organizations. Glass got October accommodations at the mountain lodge for about \$119 per person, per night. "It's a good bargain for us," he said.

The search for bargains is hardly limited to Georgia, said Vicki Hawarden, vice president of knowledge and events for Meeting Professionals International. Based in Dallas, MPI has more than 21,000 members around the world, plus chapters across the United States. Meeting planners in other states, including Georgia, say they are eyeing parks for off-site gatherings, she said.

"People," she said, "are looking for more value now."

CAPTION: AmFac Parks & Resorts Unicoi State Park & Lodge is one of seven sites owned by the Department of Natural Resources that can accommodate sales meetings, conventions and other corporate gatherings.

Credit: STAFF