

**ME PRODUCTIONS**  
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Deidre Underwood  
Dir. of Business  
Theater

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## The New South's hub city offers it all

by Carolyn Blackburn

A transportation hub for more than a century, Atlanta proudly carries its "Gateway to the South" title on its shoulders. Since 1837, when the Western & Atlantic Railroad chose

Atlanta as the southern end of its tracks, the city's been a highly accessible meetings mecca. No doubt about it, the folks in "Hotlanta" want people to visit. From 1930, when the first scheduled passenger air service to Atlanta was initiated by Delta Air Lines, until today, with Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport maintaining a steady flow of visitors—more than 17 million a year—Atlanta's had a way to shuffle people in. The city serves up a heaping portion of the meeting planner's pie: Getting them there.

"Hartsfield is huge," says Cheryl Gattis, conference manager for Atlanta-based Meeting Expectations, describing both the airport's size and importance. "For conferences, it provides easy access for everyone."

Gattis considers Atlanta an attractive city that offers a variety of hotels, entertainment options and meeting venues, including the Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) campus, which features 1.4 million square feet of exhibit space.

"Atlanta is great for citywide conferences," agrees Deidre Underwood, director of business theater for South Florida-based ME Productions. "It's less hungry than tier-one locations in terms of affordability, and it's easy to get around." This is due in large part to Atlanta's mass transit system, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA). For 17 of the last 21 years, the American Public Transit Association has selected MARTA as the nation's safest city system. Planners such as Rae Baskin, president of Indianapolis-based The ConferenceWorks!, forewarn delegates that it costs around \$20 to valet park and tips them off to MARTA, which provides convenient transportation to and from Hartsfield.

"I tell them to use MARTA," she says. "But it depends on how much stuff they have. If they're bringing dozens of boxes, they're better off in a car."

### In Town

After you've gotten them there and you know they'll get around with ease, it's time to introduce delegates to Atlanta's many attractions. Gattis recommends choosing a restaurant with Southern flair—offering dishes of fried green tomatoes and fried chicken—such as Agnes & Murief's or the Horseradish Grill. Underwood suggests a tour of the World of Coca-Cola museum, which features function space, on-site catering and three stories of exhibits, including Tastes of the World, an international sampler of soft drinks distributed by The Coca-Cola Company but not available in the U.S.

Atlanta is a big sports town, so depending on the season, planners can bring their group to root for one of its teams: Braves baseball

"They can light a corporate logo on the field," she says. "C shine it right on the scoreboard. [The venue can host] any from a smaller group in its club room to big, interactive functions."

Point those who want to jump from the sidelines to Center Olympic Park—a 21-acre green space located adjacent to GWCC—for hiking or biking. Piedmont Park also has bike paths, a promenade and a visitors center. The 18-mile Stc Mountain/Atlanta Trail connects Georgia Tech to Stone Mountain Park and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site. The Buckhead neighborhood, Atlanta's answer to New Or French Quarter and Miami's South Beach, is home to the Governor's Mansion and the Atlanta History Museum by d and transforms into a lively hotspot lined with clubs and restaurants by night.

"It's full of bars and evening venues," Gattis says. "It's a g place to party."

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"Rhett and Scarlett were walking around for photo ops and international guests especially ate it up," she says, adding "they didn't let the gospel singers go; gospel is a real Ame art form."

### Outlying Areas

Atlanta's variety of accommodations and meeting facilities combined with its accessibility, makes it an obvious choice planners.

"It's a pleasant city," Baskin says. "Atlanta is easy to deal and its CVB was helpful."

Within city limits, and extending outward to the metro's perimeter, Greater Atlanta pleases delegates who find themselves in town for a convention.

"It's a major citywide destination," Underwood says. "Ever single bus, off-site venue and hotel room—they're eating i As Buckhead is likely Atlanta's most popular neighborhood Gone With the Wind themes have laced through town like Scarlett's corset since the classic's worldwide debut party The Georgian Terrace Hotel in 1939. Underwood describe meeting she held for 600 guests, complete with Butler and O'Hara look-a-likes and gospel music, another Southern tradition.

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