



The National Tattoo Association rotates its annual convention to cities including Seattle, Philadelphia and Reno, Nev., where it returns next year.

UNCONVENTIONAL CONVENTIONS AND THE CITIES THAT LOVE THEM

BY LISA PLUMMER

From jugglers to tattoo artists, clowns to crystal healers, new-age spiritualists to people who like wearing animal costumes, there seems to be a group, club or association for pretty much every interest under the sun. And just like any organization of like-minded individuals, people who share a common interest, no matter how offbeat, also like to gather together, and that requires picking the right destination to do so. For some groups, it's as simple as finding cities that meet their budgetary, space and room needs, while for others, it's about choosing cities that are more open-minded and receptive to their subjects. But no matter where they meet and why they meet there, unconventional groups are serious about selecting good destinations, and their convention cities are serious about hosting them — and bringing them back.

The Right Fit

Like most associations, unconventional groups seek out appealing, cost-effective destinations that also offer plenty of interesting activities and entertainment options. Such is the criteria of the National Tattoo Association, which rotates its annual NTA Tattoo Convention throughout the country.

"We pick sites that our members enjoy going to, places where they can do things besides the convention," says Flo Makofske, NTA treasurer and convention coordinator. "[We like] any place that is interesting or has interesting things to go see or do. Most of our members look upon NTA tattoo conventions as their vacation time, too, so by moving it around, we get to see more of the U.S.A."

The association rotates back to destinations that have become member favorites, including Seattle, Philadelphia and Reno, Nev., where it returns for the fifth time next April.

NTA's mission is to promote tattooing as a contemporary art form. The association has 1,100 members, including some of the most talented tattoo artists worldwide. Its annual convention attracts approximately half of its membership, Makofske says, depending on the region.

Although the convention agenda typically includes receptions, seminars, meetings and special events like bike runs and golf tournaments, the event's focus is on its attendees' main passion: tattooing. Enter the "Tattoo Room," where approximately 100 tattoo artists in

more than 50 booths perform their art on willing members of the public during the weekend portion of the event.

Hosting the NTA's 29th Annual Tattoo Convention in 2008 was a memorable and, well, colorful experience, says Liesel Sollman, regional sales director of Reno's Peppermill Resort Spa Casino. "They were an very interesting group of people," says Sollman. "They used our new Tuscan Ballroom and set up booths where they were doing tattoo artistry the whole time," she says. "They were really nice guests. All artists have a medium that they use, and they just happen to tattoo."

Maybe there's something in the water in Reno that attracts unconventional conventions because the International Jugglers' Association (IJA) just held its 63rd Annual Festival at John Ascuaga's Nugget Hotel Casino Resort there in late July. Or maybe it's just that Reno and the neighboring city of Sparks are accessible and affordable second-tier meeting destinations with a number of hotels, casinos and meeting spaces.

With a membership of about 1,600 jugglers from all over the world, the IJA typically attracts between 250 and 500 members to its annual festival, depending on where it's held, says Kim Laird, IJA chairwoman. Finding the right city and a suitable venue for this high-energy event isn't as simple as choosing an interesting and inexpensive location that members want to visit. Host-city venues have to be equipped to meet IJA's space specifications, Laird says, when attendees

are tossing a variety of objects into the air — and to other jugglers.

"We're a very unusual group in that we need a gym area, a wide-open space or banquet room that doesn't have chandeliers in it," says Laird. "We need high ceilings and at least five other rooms we can use for the workshops we run. Another requirement is that there must be a theater (for performances) either in or nearby the facility, usually within walking distance."

Unlike most meetings, the IJA festival runs 24 hours a day for seven days straight, featuring almost non-stop juggling in its designated gym area. Besides unlimited practice time, the busy itinerary also includes workshops, vendors, competitions, award ceremonies, evening performances and special community events.

Repeat Business

The IJA has moved its festival to many different cities through the years, but Laird says the association enjoys returning to destinations that understand the festival's special needs. In 2012, the festival returns to Winston-Salem, N.C., for a third time.

"That city was awesome," says Laird. "What we learned about going back to a city the second time is they understand your needs and you understand how the city works, so it makes things very easy to get things set up, and the contacts are already made. Especially with an organization as odd as ours, where we are literally



The Western Region Clown Association returns to Laughlin, Nev., each fall for its annual convention. "Nothing gives our customers pause like a group of clowns in a rainbow of colors, goofy shoes and meticulous makeup walking around the resort," says Lloyd Shires with Don Laughlin Riverside Resort and Casino.



coming into a city to throw things at each other and in the air, that's really valuable."

Sometimes, a city and an event are a perfect match, and conference organizers keep going back to the city year after year. Laughlin, Nev., and the Annual Western Region Clown Association Convention make one such match. The city has hosted the convention every year for more than a quarter of a century.

At Don Laughlin's Riverside Resort and Casino (yes, the Don Laughlin for which the town of Laughlin is named), clowning around is serious business. Clowns invade the property each fall, which is great for the resort's business, but it's fun for its customers, too, says Lloyd Shires, director of hotel operations and marketing.

"It's crazy to think it has already been 25 years since we first sponsored the WRCA annual convention," said Shires. "Having hundreds of colorful clowns on property makes for great fun and the customers love it. We have bull riding, off-road racing, Harley runs, top name

concerts and other activities in town, but nothing gives our customers pause like a group of clowns in a rainbow of colors, goofy shoes and meticulous makeup walking around the resort. It is truly unique among all that happens here."

Laughlin continues to be a great fit for the convention due to its affordability, central western location and the resort's friendly and accommodating staff, says WRCA President Jay Anthony.

"It's probably the most affordable place we could have our convention," Anthony says. "Our expenses are very low and we don't have to pay for most of our education rooms. We like Laughlin and Don Laughlin likes us," he says, referring to the gambling entrepreneur and hotelier who still owns the resort. "He gives us a lot of leeway and lets us use his restaurant in the non-smoking section of the casino for balloon making and face painting when our sessions are over at night."

The event brings about 300 professional clowns to Laughlin each year, Anthony

says. Fifty-six educational sessions cover essential clown topics like face painting, magic, balloon making, juggling, and hospital and ministry clowning. The event also includes an awards banquet, performances and vendors, as well as a special clown parade for resort guests and community members.

"We work the crowd and invite the local school kids," says Anthony. "We have cookies and milk for them afterward and they get to interact with the clowns. We're often on the local TV news and in the newspapers."

Outside the Box

Feeling at home in a destination can be an important factor for any meeting or convention, but for events that focus on topics that aren't exactly mainstream, selecting a more open-minded city can sometimes make good business sense. That's been the strategy for the International Alchemy Guild and Modern Mystery School, which selected Los Angeles four

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Wizards, witches and muggles meet every year for an annual Harry Potter conference hosted by the Harry Potter Educational Fanon to talk about their favorite lightning-bolt scarred boy wonder from J.K. Rowling's enormously successful book series. Read about why the face-to-face conference and other fan conventions have become so important in the world of fandoms (page 42).

"Furries" invade Pittsburgh every year for Anthrocon, an annual convention for anthropomorphic animal enthusiasts.



years ago to launch its annual International Alchemy Conference. Held at the Los Angeles Convention Center (LACC), the event focused on self-transformation through movement, meditation and spirituality.

Animating Genius, an event production company, organized the show. Randy Olsen, the company's organizing consultant, says it was important to the Alchemy Guild to find a progressive destination with a demographic that could relate to the event's subject matter. The organization also wanted a city that would enable it to reach its attendee potential.

"People 'get' the topic in L.A. ... It's kind of a hub for that mind, body, spirit sort of thing," says Olsen. "[The Guild] wanted a recognizable city and felt there was a large demographic that would be receptive to this sort of unique area."

As the interest in self-help and new-age spirituality continues to grow, so has the event, Olsen says. The 2009 event had 5,000 attendees and 300 exhibitors. Next year, the conference heads to the Long Beach Convention Center and will have a wide range of speakers, workshops, a trade show and an appearance by the Golden Pyramid of Peace project, an international peace organization.

For a host facility, all meetings business is good meetings business, regardless of subject matter. All events the LACC hosts are equally valued, respected and appreciated, says Pouria Abbassi, CEO and general manager.

"[We take] every business that considers hosting their event at this venue seriously," says Abbassi. "Mainstream or not, every event has its constituency that depends on the event for various purposes."

Pittsburgh's David L. Lawrence Convention Center (DLLCC) has a similar attitude when it comes to group business, either mainstream

or offbeat. As the host venue of Anthrocon, an annual convention for anthropomorphic animal enthusiasts, the venue values all business equally, from people in business suits to people in full-sized dog costumes. Anthrocon brings in nearly \$6 million in economic impact each year, and that money is not only a strong revenue boost for the city but also keeps the DLLCC busy at a low-demand time of year, says Craig Davis, vice president of sales and marketing of VisitPittsburgh.

"We're delighted that [Anthrocon's] experience in Pittsburgh is a great one, evidenced by the fact that they keep coming back," says Davis. "Pittsburgh has so many incredible amenities and it's such a friendly town that convention attendees invariably love it here."





And love it they do, at least according to Anthrocon Inc. Chairman and CEO Samuel Conway, who says that since the event moved from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh five years ago, its audience has never been happier and continues to grow steadily. The most recent event, held June 24-27, attracted 4,200 attendees and 175 exhibitors.

Activities during the four-day fur fest included performances, panel discussions, workshops, appearances by well-known cartoon and animation professionals, an art show, vendors, a banquet for sponsors, and a special reception for artists and

guests of honor. Conway says the most important part of Anthrocon is that it brings together a community of people who may have always felt alone in their creativity.

“These furies, as they like to identify themselves, are among the most wildly imaginative, boundlessly creative individuals on the face of the earth and it is a remarkable thing to get them all together in one spot,” says Conway. “We’re cartoonists, animators, artists, performers — anybody who’s interested in cartoon animals that walk and talk.”

Although there will always be some residents who may not see the humor in

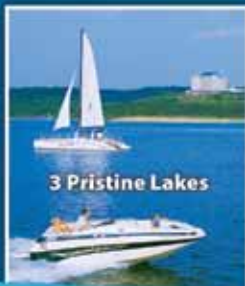
being overrun by full-sized cartoon characters, the city of Pittsburgh always does its best to make this unique group feel very welcomed and appreciated, Conway says. And unless Anthrocon outgrows the venue and its hotel inventory, it plans to stay, he adds.

“There’s always going to be a stuffy person who thinks adults shouldn’t act this way,” says Conway. “But for the most part, the people of Pittsburgh just adore [Anthrocon]. The local news always gives us good coverage and we have become identifiable in the city. We turn the city furry.” ■



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