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Springfield and the Berkshires

Dynamic Duo

by Jeff Heilman

Roughly squared off by interstates 91 and 90 (the Mass Pike) and routes 7 and 2 (the Mohawk Trail), the northwestern corner of Massachusetts offers planners a remarkably diverse portfolio of group and hospitality products.

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For metropolitan meetings, Springfield, the urban center of the Pioneer Valley, remains one of the most popular group destinations in the Northeast.

"Significantly less expensive than top-tier cities such as Boston or New York City, Springfield offers a state-of-the-art meeting site, top accommodations, a variety of attractions, dining options and more," says Mary Kay Wydra, president of the Greater Springfield CVB. "Springfield is also easily accessible and devoid of the traffic gridlock and parking hassles found in bigger cities."

For open-air escapes, meanwhile, the Berkshire Mountain region is proof positive that great things come in small packages.

"As one of the country's top travel destinations, the Berkshires is a great place to bring your meeting or event at any time of year," says Lindsey Schmid, director of marketing services for The Berkshire Visitors Bureau. "We are a small region with a giant reputation for world-class art and cultural offerings, fascinating historic sites, intriguing architecture, unique shopping and some of the best dining in Massachusetts."

For groups, it's a dynamic duo offering the best of all worlds.

GREATER SPRINGFIELD

Situated at the juncture of Interstate 91 and the Mass Pike, the "Crossroads of New England," Springfield's accessibility also includes Amtrak and Peter Pan Bus Lines service, with Bradley International Airport just 20 miles south of the city. Supported by more than 2,500 local hotel rooms, including just under 950 in downtown Springfield, the multipurpose MassMutual Center is the leading convention facility in Western Massachusetts.

With versatile options including 40,000 square feet of exhibition space, more than 15,000 square feet of meeting and prefunction space and a 14,000-square-foot ballroom, the center is part of SpringfieldFIRST. Comprising key personnel from the Center, GSCVB and leading downtown hotels, SpringfieldFIRST is a group initiative responsible for marketing Springfield to potential groups and securing convention bookings.

"From welcome signage and hospitality alerts around town to V.I.P. baskets and gift bags for select group members, one of the most distinctive and attractive 'extras' visiting groups can enjoy is our range of convention hospitality services," Wydra says.

Sheraton Springfield Monarch Place and Springfield Marriott are the city's top convention hotels, both by the Connecticut River.

Offering 24 meeting rooms and 32,000 square feet of meeting space, the Sheraton features 325 freshly updated guest rooms and newly enhanced meeting and banquet spaces, food outlets and common areas following \$6.5 million in renovations. The 265-room Marriott, meanwhile, offers 16 meeting rooms and 11,000 square feet of meeting space.

Just minutes from the convention center, both properties also put delegates within easy reach of Springfield's main attractions, such as the celebrated four venues of the Springfield Museums. The basketball-shaped Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame is a group must, with flexible space including a center court configurable for large meetings. Just a few blocks away, event-capable CityStage showcases live Off-Broadway comedies, dramas and musicals, while the historic 2,611-seat Symphony Hall, located in the heart of downtown, is also available for meetings.

Fanning out from Springfield, the Pioneer Valley offers diverse group facilities ranging from the multivenue Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield to Six Flags New England in nearby Agawam.

Some 30 minutes north of Springfield, Museums10 is a consortium of 10 of the Pioneer Valley's leading attractions, including the Emily Dickinson Museum, the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and Smith College Museum of Art. In eclectic Northampton, the Hotel Northampton, built in 1927, features 106 rooms and suites and six flexible function areas, including the only true Grand Ballroom in the area.

In nearby Amherst, the landmark Lord Jeffery Inn completed a significant renovation and reopened last winter after a long hiatus. With 49 guest rooms, the historic property features 8,000 square feet of meeting and event space, including a spacious new ballroom, updated and expanded conference facilities and a new farm-to-table restaurant, 30 Boltwood. PageBreak

BERKSHIRES

For the Berkshire Visitors Bureau, leveraging the region's signature beauty is a strategic priority for 2012, including an emphasis on marketing its brand strength as a year-round destination.

"A meeting in the Berkshires combines classic New England charm and enchanting four-season beauty," Schmid says. "As planners have discovered, the region is fertile ground for creativity, collaboration, team building, renewal and accomplishment."

From autumnal leaf peepers to cultural enthusiasts, this classically New England corner attracts some 2.6 million visitors annually, and it is easy to see why. Few areas come as gifted as the Berkshires, a glorious hilly tapestry of villages, fields, farms and forests that includes Mount Greylock, the state's highest peak. Moved by its magic, famed American author, philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau wrote in his A Night on Mount Greylock of "...such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise."

With four all-season mountain resorts—Bousquet, Ski Butternut, Catamount and Jiminy Peak—and numerous golf courses, hiking trails and other recreations, there are outdoor options for all group speeds and budgets. Atop Mount Greylock's 3,491-foot summit, the rustic stone and wood Bascom Lodge, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, is a dramatic seasonal choice for small group events and overnight stays.

That the Berkshires drew Thoreau and other creative luminaries such as Norman Rockwell, Herman Melville and James Taylor says much about the region's spiritual appeal, too—the panoramas here are cultural and historical as well as natural.

Running some 40 miles north from Great Barrington to Williamstown, the Route 7 corridor is rich with artistic, curatorial and heritage opportunities for groups. Home to the landmark Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, Great Barrington is just south of historic Stockbridge, where local treasures include the Norman Rockwell Museum, Berkshire Botanical Garden and the 18th century Mission House, Gardens & Indian Museum.

Chesterwood, the 122-acre former home and studio of Lincoln Memorial sculptor Daniel Chester French, and Naumkeag House and Gardens are exceptional group draws, while the celebrated 125-room Red Lion Inn, dating to Revolutionary War days, is Stockbridge's primary group base, hosting from two to 80 people in eight private meeting spaces.

Gayle Murphy, the hotel's corporate sales manager, says the property is focused on the "all seasons" marketing message.

"Easily accessible for groups throughout the Northeast and with many of our museums, theaters and other attractions open year-round, we have been attracting more off-season business," Murphy says. "Meeting planners can have the same great experience at The Red Lion Inn during the off-season as in busier times, with a bonus of thinner crowds and lower room rates."

East of Stockbridge in Becket, groups enjoy dance performances and function space at the National Historic Landmark Jacob's Pillow, while continuing northward, charming Lenox offers a symphony of attractions.

Tanglewood is the region's top visitor attraction, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra typically performing three concerts every weekend in July and August. Dating from 1936, this tradition arose from Gilded Age urbanites who established fabulous summer "cottages" in the Berkshires. Today, the 19-room Wheatleigh Hotel and The Museum of Gilded Age at Ventfort Hall live on as regal group draws, along with gems such The Mount, the early 20th century estate of writer Edith Wharton.

Perennial meetings favorite Cranwell Resort and Golf Club, meanwhile, has opened its rebuilt Carriage House, an 18-room guesthouse combining the historic flavor of this Gilded Age hilltop mansion resort with contemporary amenities.

Seat of Berkshire County and the region's commercial center, Pittsfield was called the "Brooklyn of the Berkshires" by the Financial Times in 2010 for its ongoing resurgence. With group assets including the 1903 Colonial Theatre, Herman Melville's home of Arrowhead and the versatile Hancock Shaker Village, the birthplace of General Electric (and possibly baseball), is enhancing its appeal via the new Upstreet Cultural District, a designation intended to promote Pittsfield as a tourist destination for the creative arts and business scene. Renovated last summer, the 59-room Best Western Berkshire Hills Inn & Suites is a centrally located base for groups.

Designated this summer as the Antiques Capital of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—a recent Berkshire Visitors Bureau survey found that 69 percent of visitors chose antiquing during their stay—the Berkshires assumes its grandest scale in Williamstown and North Adams.

Home of Williams College, founded in 1793 and the nation's leading small college, Williamstown features meetings-ready hotels such as the 1921 Williams Inn and cultural attractions such as the world-renowned Clark Art Institute, Williams College Museum of Art and Williamstown Theatre Festival.

At the foot of Mount Greylock, neighboring North Adams is home to The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Occupying a 13-acre campus of renovated 19th century factory buildings, MASS MoCA is the nation's largest contemporary arts center, with the adjacent 47-room Porches Inn, flexible function space included, serving as an artful group base.

Visiting the Williams campus in the mid-1800s, Thoreau observed, "It would be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain."

The same goes for the Berkshires, country of dreams.

Full disclosure: Regular Meetings Focus East contributor Jeff Heilman is a proud graduate of Williams College.