

10 Great Destinations For SMERF Meetings

By Theresa Crider

Considering that SMERF (social, military, educational, religious and fraternal) groups typically look for destinations that are affordable, accessible and have a wide range of options for events, accommodations, downtime and other special requirements, finding the right spot for a meeting can sometimes be a challenge. Yet, you can find everything you need to have a satisfying, successful meeting experience at numerous destinations across the South. Here are 10 destinations to check out that say they are particularly well-suited to SMERF groups:

Albany, Ga.

Located in south Georgia, 30 minutes west of U.S. Interstate 75, Albany has much to offer SMERF groups, according to Lisa Riddle, convention services manager for the Albany CVB, adding that while all types of SMERF groups are well suited to the area, Albany hosts numerous religious and social events such as family reunions.

Albany can accommodate groups ranging in size from 10 to 10,000 people, has more than 2,000 hotel guest rooms and a variety of meeting facilities, Riddle said. "Albany has so much

to offer through entertainment, attractions and educational activities, many of which are conveniently located downtown. We also offer a variety of golf, restaurant and shopping opportunities." Popular sites for SMERF groups are the Flint RiverQuarium, which features more than 100 aquatic creatures; Parks at Chehaw, 100-acre nature park; and the recently opened Ray Charles Plaza, a new downtown river park that features a life-sized bronze statue of musician Ray Charles at his piano.

Fayetteville, N.C.

"Groups get lots of special attention from both the community and our bureau," said John Meroski, president/CEO of the Fayetteville (N.C.) Area CVB. "We work with each group individually and we customize our services depending on the needs of the group."

Military groups are especially suited for Fayetteville because of its rich military history and close proximity to Fort Bragg, the largest military installation in the country, Meroski

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Airborne & Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville, N.C.

said, adding that the city is home to the Airborne and Special Operations Museum. He also explained that religious groups are attracted to the destination because of its central location and diversity of faiths. Of the area's churches, Camp Ground Methodist Church, was organized in 1860 and Bethel A.M.E. Zion Church was founded in 1883.

What's more, Meroski said historical structures across the city have been painstakingly preserved in four designated historic districts: Downtown Historic District, Haymount

Historic District, Liberty Point National Register District and Market House Square National Register District. And, new development abounds. Meroski said in the last two years, more than \$24 million has been invested into hotel properties.

Greenville, S.C.

"Blend the outdoors with an award-winning downtown and you have the perfect destination for your meetings," said Ryan Herron, CMP, director of sales for the Greenville (S.C.) CVB. SMERF groups will be surprised by the abundance of unique outdoor activities found in the area, including kayaking, climbing, hiking, fly fishing and hiking trails, he said, adding that downtown Greenville features a tree-lined Main Street with more than 100 restaurants and shops within walking distance. And, Falls Park features a public park and a garden with a 355-foot pedestrian bridge overlooking waterfalls.

Herron also explained that Greenville is easily accessible and offers an abundance of

flexible and affordable meeting space. The Carolina First Center offers more than 340,000 square feet of meeting space. Hotel brands such as Crowne Plaza, Hilton, Holiday Inn, Hyatt, Marriott and Westin offer on-site meeting space.



Hot Springs, Ark.

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