

Cultural Conduits

By Holly Woolard

As any travel company will attest, cultural immersion is often a critical component of the guest experience. But what about meetings and conventions? Do attendees expect to have cultural experiences when they travel to events, and how can meeting planners weave these kinds of opportunities into jam-packed schedules?

One simple solution is to take advantage of pre-existing team-building activities with a cultural bent. It's surprising how many resorts, lodges, luxury hotels and theme parks feature some type of team-building program aimed at introducing guests to local traditions and unifying participants through projects that require group cooperation.

The Fairmont Orchid, Hawaii on Hawaii, the Big Island, for example, arranges group excursions to a taro farm (pictured). The taro plant is a staple of Hawaiian culture, used to make poi among many other things. The plant also carries many meanings associated with life, family and sustainability. While at the farm, set deep within the Waipio Valley, attendees learn about the *loi* (taro patch), the *kalo* (taro plant) and *ohana* (family). Participants are divided into three groups, with one harvesting the plants, one cutting the stalk from the existing plant and the other replanting the stalk.

Making Connections

"Not only does this exercise serve as a great team-building activity, but it also connects the group to the Hawaiian culture, which is alive and well on the island of Hawaii," says Jaisy Jardine, director of public relations for The Fairmont.

Another team-building activity offered through The Fairmont features outrigger canoes, once used by native Hawaiians to cross the rough channels between the islands. Experienced Hawaiian guides help groups organize regattas and other team-building activities utilizing multiple canoes.

For a slice of Western country living, **Rancho de los Caballeros** in Wickenburg, Ariz., is a member of the Dude Ranchers' Association and offers team building through steer penning on horseback. Groups of three or four plus an experienced cowboy try to separate steers from a group, moving a specific number from one end of the arena to the other, where a 12-by-12-foot pen awaits. Team cowboys provide as much or as little help as groups need in this timed event.

"You have people who have never been on a horse before who are given a job," says Theresa Jackson, the resort's director of sales. "The only way to be successful is to communicate. They have to work together as a team. It's very rewarding."

The historic guest ranch resort and golf club, set amid 20,000 acres of Sonoran Desert, also offers trap and skeet shooting and hayrides. With a 100-horse corral, Rancho de los Caballeros has ample resources for attendees to get their cowboy on and become closer as a cohesive unit as well.

Bishop's Lodge Ranch Resort & Spa in Santa Fe, N.M., will help planners organize an offsite in the beautiful Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Knowledgeable guides lead a late-afternoon hike based on each group's levels of interest and fitness. It includes stops to learn about local flora and geology. Participants are treated to a cooking class before a chef helps them whip up a mountain meal using Dutch ovens. While preparing the meal, attendees savor a glass of local wine and some fresh chips and salsa and soak in the breathtaking northern New Mexico sunset. For more active groups, there's a scavenger hunt in which



team members use GPS devices to move from one destination to another, while uncovering resources and information needed to create a gourmet meal.

"Santa Fe is known for its distinguished culture and cuisine and the spectacular scenic beauty of the surrounding mountains and skies," says Owen Perillo, founding owner of Santa Fe Mountain Adventures. "This event combines the best of these elements in a five- to six-hour experience."

Learning as a Team

When meeting in Cancun or Playa del Carmen, Mexico, a great one-stop shop for cultural immersion and team building is the **Xcaret** eco theme park, featuring magnificent white beaches, canals, cenotes, caves, rivers, subterranean caverns and an archaeological zone. With 13 meeting spaces and room for groups of up to 2,000, Xcaret can host a variety of events and then set attendees free to explore this majestic seaside park on the Caribbean Sea.

The Xcaret team-building program features 10 learning stations situated throughout the park. Groups scurry from station to station in order to answer questions, take photos, perform a play about a Mayan legend at the theater, gain insights into the sacred jaguar and explore natural pools to find clues to solve a puzzle.

"Our team-building program relies on questions and challenges aimed at the knowledge of the Mayan culture and the great biodiversity and beauty offered by the park," says Aura Maristany, Experiencias Xcaret manager for groups and conventions sales. "The activities take place in a fun environment in which we encourage collaboration between team members and a healthy coexistence."

The park hosts a nightly show replete with all the mystery and magnificence of the ancient Mayan kings. Guests can also snorkel and see live demonstrations of traditional Mexican weaving and pottery making.

Even if meeting schedules are packed with speakers, breakouts and brainstorming sessions, attendees will appreciate and respond to team-building activities with a cultural component. It's the perfect one-two combo to make the most of limited time and help attendees learn more about each other and the meeting destination.