



COLUMBUS: QUIRKY, FRIENDLY, FUN

The capital of Ohio offers a connected venue and growing entertainment district. Best of all, it's just an hour away from most of your attendees.

BY MARGO PIERCE

Ohio, referred to as the “cross-roads of America” by settlers moving west, has more to offer now than the last chance to restock provisions and rest the horses before going out into the great unknown. Columbus, in particular, showcases the fun and friendliness of this Midwestern event destination.

“Everybody knows that the event is in town and, from the second folks get off the airplane until the time they get back on the plane, they know the city has [its] arms open and welcoming them to the event,” says Brent LaLonde, director of communications with Arnold Sports Festival. “The largest multi-sport festival in the United States, we’ll have 50 different sports events in 2014 [with] 18,000 athletes, about 175,000

attendees over four days, and we use 1,500 volunteers on the weekend.”

That friendly spirit is evident in the service provided by every restaurant, shop and entertainment venue as well, according to LaLonde. And he should

know: his event has been in Columbus for 25 years and has “grown up with the city.” LaLonde values the partnership his organiza-

tion has been able to develop within the community.

“It’s that Midwestern hospitality,” he says. “Oftentimes, when you go to a convention in Orlando or Chicago, those are such large convention destinations that even the largest of conventions can get lost in the enormity of a destination that big.”

With that hometown feel in Columbus comes some unexpected surprises that visitors don’t always anticipate.

Short North offers a fun respite from the work of the day. The eclectic arts, fashion, dining and shopping district is just across the street from the Greater Columbus Convention Center. It offers visitors pocket parks, public art in the form of sculpture and murals, galleries, unique restaurants and special events throughout the year.

“There are a lot of gourmet restaurants,” says Brian Ross, president and CEO of the Columbus Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, better known as Experience Columbus. “They’re not chains,

Columbus Convention Center Fast Facts:

- TOTAL SPACE
1.7 million sq. ft.
- EXHIBITION SPACE
426,000 sq. ft.
- MEETING SPACE AVAILABLE:
65 meeting rooms
- BALLROOM SPACE
- 3 ballrooms
- 74,000 sq. ft. (skyline view)
- 50,000 sq. ft. main floor
- 24,000 sq. ft. mezzanine

HOTEL HAPPENINGS:

NEW DIGS

- The Hilton Columbus Downtown opened in October 2012 as a 532-room, full-service convention hotel connected to the convention center.
- The Joseph, a Meridian property, will open at the end of 2015 in the Short North Arts District.

UPGRADES

“All of our hotels in the last two and a half years have undergone renovations,” according to Brian Ross, president and CEO of the Columbus Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, called Experience Columbus. Some of those include:

- HYATT REGENCY COLUMBUS
- DRURY INN & SUITES HOTEL
- RESIDENCE INN
- SHERATON SUITES COLUMBUS
- MARRIOTT COURTYARD
- RENAISSANCE COLUMBUS DOWNTOWN HOTEL

they all got their start in Columbus.”

Looking for something else that personifies this town? Look no further than the High-ball. Described by organizers as “a creative mash-up that’s a bit Mardi Gras, a bit Carnivale and a lot Halloween,” the annual public party encompasses Short North and promises “eye-popping costumes.”

In keeping with the quirky Columbus community, the convention center is a visually stunning, award-winning facility designed by internationally renowned architect Peter Eisenman. He focused on the convergence of highways, railroad tracks and fiber-optic cables running through the city to create a dramatic design for the building. That same accessibility that inspired the building is also what makes it a great location for any event, according to Ross.

For the more conventional, there’s baseball (the Columbus Clippers, the Cleveland Indians’ AAA affiliate), arts events (Columbus Association for the Performing Arts) and a plethora of live performance venues.

“Shadowbox is a sketch comedy and rock-and-roll club, original comedy [that] can be outrageous,” Ross says. “The Lifestyle Community Center [brings] in all genres of music, from



Short North is a district near the Columbus Convention Center that—in a relatively short amount of time—has become famous for its restaurants, shops and entertainment venues, all within walking distance of the city’s No. 1 tradeshow venue.

hip-hop to rock to country. They have an indoor facility and an amphitheater.”

“We are a day’s drive or an hour’s flight from 60 percent of the population in the U.S. and Canada,” he says. “We’re one of the most affordable destinations in the nation to do business. It’s the total expense—the transportation, the food and beverage, accommodations, attraction, retail.”

Ross also points to the 15 Fortune 1,000 and six Fortune 500 companies headquartered in Columbus as resources for event planners looking for industry experts to present at meetings and conventions.

“[Experience Columbus] writes and executes 100 hotel contracts for us,”

LaLonde says. “They help create and deliver welcome signage and welcome buttons. They go out with us to visit all the hotels prior

GOOD TO KNOW

Dam Removal Project

The Main Street Dam on the Scioto River, which runs through downtown Columbus, is being removed in order to narrow the river’s channel and return it to a natural flow. This will result in 33 more acres of land available to development, potentially new parks.

Urban Oasis

Two new parks opened in 2011—Columbus Commons and the Scioto Mile. But there are a number of other outdoor places to visit and things to do during any season.

Columbus Statehouse

The 10 acres that surround the state capitol building are host to a number of statues and monuments (cellphone tour available) and offer space for public events when the grounds aren’t being used for weddings or political rallies.

Topiary Park

Located behind the Columbus Metropolitan Library, the park offers visitors mature trees, beautiful landscaping and a whimsical topiary garden—a re-creation of Georges Seurat’s famous pointillist painting, “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.”

Food Truck Mania

With 45 different vendors, Columbus not only has enough food trucks and carts to support a festival, but you’ll get a lot of variety. Enjoy the gourmet flavors of Boston Bert’s Seafood, OH! Burgers, Pizza Cottage, Tatoheads, Go Cupcake, Pho Fast, El Tuzo Taco and Glass City BBQ, from among the group.

to the event. They work with us at the airport. They help us recruit volunteers. They feel like part of our staff heading up to the event.”

Whether it’s the 150 different restaurants and entertainment venues within walking distance of the convention center or the appeal of an unusual destination for your next show, LaLonde believes any show planner will be happy they chose the Buckeye state.

“Once you get here and see what we have, I think you’ll be sold,” he says. ✕



What exactly is a Buckeye?

The Buckeye is the state tree. The Buckeye is also a nut, not edible, with a sweet counterpart: a peanut butter candy covered in chocolate (which is edible), both of which can be found in and around Columbus.