



Smart meetings

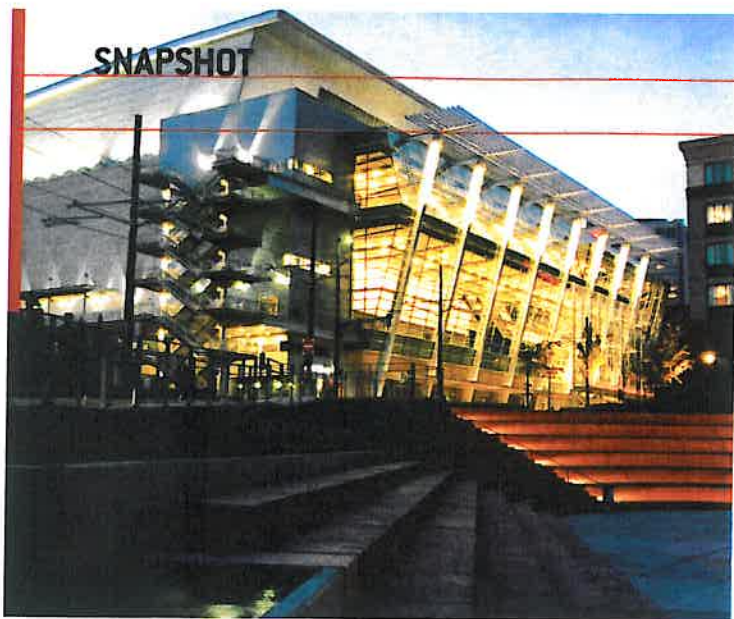
The Intelligent Way to Plan in the Western Region

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Left to right, Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center; Hotel Murano front desk; Venetian Wall of Chihuly Bridge of Glass; Chambers Bay Pure Links Golf.

TACOMA, WASH.

An urban awakening of giant proportions

By Talia Salem

Just 36 miles south of Seattle on Puget Sound sits Tacoma, the second-largest city in Washington. At the base of Mount Rainier, it no longer dozes in the shadow of this iconic peak, churning out the factory smoke of its industrial past. “Tacoma was named the city of destiny 120 years ago when it was founded, and it has largely been asleep for the last 80 years, up until about a decade ago,” says Zak Nelson, communications manager for the **Tacoma Regional Convention & Visitor Bureau** (traveltacoma.com). “There’s a great buzz now; it’s the sleeping giant that’s stretching its arms and coming back to life.”

According to Nelson, city planners wanted to improve the quality of life here, and after a major grassroots effort, or as the locals like to say “glass-roots,” the city has undergone a modern renaissance with scores of revitalization projects, like the dramatic **Foss Waterway** (theafoss.com), a mixed-use district near downtown. The paper and lumber mills that once lined its shores have been replaced by a sparkling art scene (linked to Tacoma native and world-renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly),

GETTING THERE

- Tacoma is served by **Sea-Tac Airport** (portseattle.org/seatac), which is about half-an-hour from the city. Several major carriers, including United, Alaska, American and Southwest Airlines, offer direct flights from major U.S. cities.

a culture of gourmet food and brewpubs, endless outdoor activities, state-of-the-art meeting venues and a bustling, revitalized waterfront district. Coupled with the affordability of a smaller city and major airlift provided by the nearby Sea-Tac Airport, Tacoma is giving its neighbor to the north some competition.

The city is shaped like a curving triangle perched over a cliff, with Point Defiance Park at the apex. Puget Sound flanks both sides, with Commencement Bay and the Foss Waterway, home to the museum district and Ruston Way, a vibrant waterfront with shops, restaurants and bars, to the east. The Chihuly Bridge of Glass, a 500-foot pedestrian bridge decorated with Chihuly’s work, connects the Foss Waterway to downtown, where you’ll find the Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center.

Smaller groups can enjoy the hospitality that Tacoma provides, and a group that would be smaller fish in a larger city fits in perfectly here, says Carmen McIntyre, the convention center’s director of sales. “We really want planners to feel like they have a one-stop shop when coming into the community. It’s a small community, and we have great relationships,” she says. The convention center works hand-in-hand with its neighboring downtown hotels, the Hotel Murano and Courtyard by Marriott Tacoma, to attract small and mid-size groups, she says.

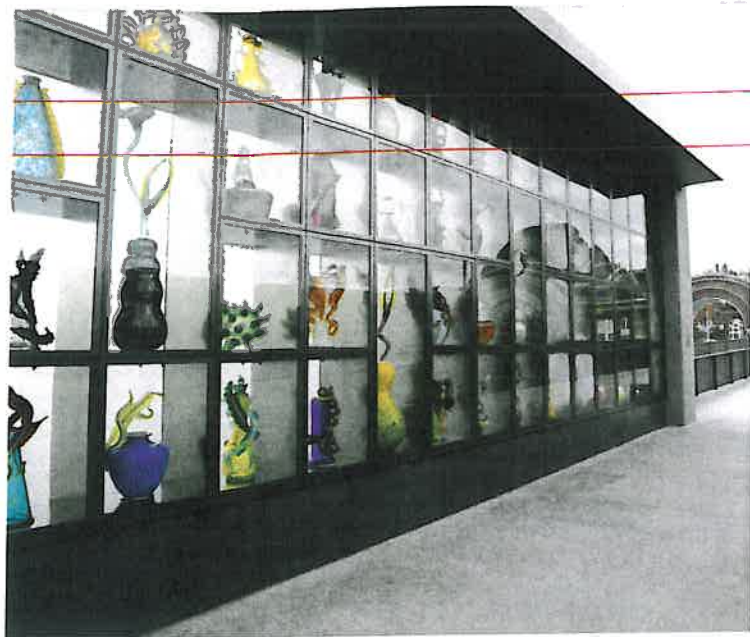
People always comment that they had no idea there is so much to do here, and “we’re still growing,” Nelson says. And the **Tacoma Link** (soundtransit.org)

makes it easy for visitors to explore the city free of charge. Meeting-goers can hop off downtown right outside of the convention center, travel to Union Station (near the Museum of Glass and Washington State History Museum) and travel all the way to the Tacoma Dome, a major concert venue.

MAJOR MEETING VENUES ▼

The largest meeting venue in the area (and one of the largest in Washington) is the **Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center** (tacomaconvention-center.com). Built in 2004, the striking, five-level glass structure is wired with the latest technology and offers groups organic, sustainable food and beverage that is free of trans fats. “The architects wanted to reflect the beauty that the Northwest is known for, so people could experience that natural beauty while being indoors,” McIntyre says. The center features more than 136,000 sq. ft. of event space, a 50,000-square-foot column-free exhibition hall and a 13,650-square-foot ballroom.

The nearby, hip 320-room **Hotel Murano** (hotelmuranotacoma.com) just completed a major \$25-million-plus renovation and art installation, making the hotel a museum in its own right. The property not only upgraded its high-tech amenities, it added a dazzling array of original glass art from artists around the world (45 to be exact). The hotel features 28,000 sq. ft. of flexible meeting space including the 5,725-square-foot Venice



Ballroom, in addition to a 5,000-square-foot spa.

Across the street from the convention center, **Courtyard by Marriott Tacoma Downtown** (marriott.com) is another option for groups. The full-service hotel has 162 guest rooms, five meeting rooms and a total of 6,661 sq. ft. of meeting space. The hotel offers high-speed Internet access throughout, an award-winning restaurant and a European-style salon and day spa.

UNIQUE VENUES ▼

No trip to Tacoma would be complete without taking in some of the local glass culture. The **Museum of Glass** (museumofglass.org) offers a variety of “hot” event spaces like the 138-seat Hot Shop Amphitheater (a 90-foot cone that is a working glass

studio) and the 6,900-square-foot Grand Hall.

Meet on the wild side at **Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium** (pdza.org), which offers many unique event spaces for a traditional meeting, picnic or team-building activity. The Education/Banquet Center features 3,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, and the zoo’s North and South Pacific aquariums can accommodate up to 300 guests for a reception with the fishes.

For a more theatrical space, groups can step into one of the theaters run by the **Broadway Center for the Performing Arts** (broadwaycenter.org). Among their distinctive venues in the heart of Tacoma are the 1,169-seat Pantages Theater (designed in the style of the theater in the Palace of Versailles, France) and the 738-seat Art Deco movie palace, the Rialto Theater.

NEWS

- **Hotel Murano** (murano.com) recently wrapped up a \$25-million-plus renovation that included the addition of works from 45 different international glass artists.
- Chambers Bay Pure Links Golf will host the **2010 U.S. Amateur Championship** (2010usamateur.com) and the **2015 U.S. Open** (usopen.com).
- **LeMay, America’s Car Museum** (lemaymuseum.org) is undergoing a \$100-million expansion project slated for completion in 2011, which will make it the largest auto museum in the world. The first phase is the addition of the 120,000-square-foot Collectors Car Center, which includes galleries, a theater, and conference and event space.

FUN ACTIVITIES ▼

Recreation-minded groups will enjoy Tacoma’s proximity to myriad recreation possibilities, and **EverGreen Escapes** (evergreenespaces.com) will be your group’s guide to the outdoors. They specialize in sustainable outdoor adventures and can take your groups to Mount Rainier, out to the Woodinville Wine Trail, or even host survival-style team-building activities.

To create a lasting memory (and memento), take your groups to **Tacoma Glass Blowing Studio** (tacomaglassblowing.com), where groups of up to 40 work with skilled glassblowers to create their own piece of glass art. According to studio owner Jeanine Sigafos, the class is such a hit that “we have groups that come back every year.”

Get your attendees out on the water in Gig Har-

bor (just outside of Tacoma) on the 83-foot **Amazing Grace Tall Ship** (amazinggracetallship.com). Up to 25 people can sail around Commencement Bay surrounded by nature or learn how to sail themselves. “We have done that with Microsoft, and we had them navigating and sailing different parts of the boat,” says Janis Denton, owner and first mate of the *Amazing Grace*.

Golf is also a big local attraction, and the **Chambers Bay Pure Links Golf** (chambersbaygolf.com) is a popular golf destination just outside of Tacoma. The Robert Trent Jones II-designed course opened in 2007 and will host the 2010 U.S. Amateur Championship and the 2015 U.S. Open. “As soon as Tiger Woods plays here, you are not going get a spot here for years to come,” the CVB’s Nelson says.

GROUP DINING ▼

Next door to the Courtyard by Marriott, the **Pacific Grill Restaurant** (pacificgrilltacoma.com) serves award-winning seafood-centric eats. In addition to offering private dining and catering, the restaurant also has an event center that includes the Pacific Ballroom, which can accommodate up to 250 guests, and the Ruston Room, which can host up to 100 guests for group meals. Nearby, for a more laid-back outing, visit the **Harmon Brewery** (harmon.harmonbrewingco.com), which can host up to 100 people for an evening of American pub food and signature brews.

Also on Pacific Avenue is **El Gaucho** (elgaucho.com), a Tacoma institution. This popular steakhouse serves up certified Angus cuts with style and offers a handful of private dining rooms hosting up to 75 guests. SM