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Bakersfield: Music, Oil and a Whole Lot More

BY JANET FULLWOOD

Most convention groups come and go with little notice from local residents. Not so for the National Street Rod Association, which roars into Bakersfield each April, attracting some 10–13,000 spectators. “You put 1,900 to 2,000 colorful modified cars of all types running all over town for three or four days, and, well, it’s pretty neat,” says Mike Chrispyn, special events director for the association.

While Bakersfield by nature is a car-crazy town, Chrispyn credits the Bakersfield Convention & Visitors Bureau as instrumental to the event’s success. “We’ve been in Bakersfield since 1987, and from my point of view, the CVB couldn’t be better to work with,” he says. “They even host a barbecue for our members.”

California’s ninth-largest city (population 364,000) has a lot going for it beyond its gung-ho car culture and ongoing oil boom that has transformed the landscape. Matthew Billingsley, sales manager for the CVB, cites two factors among the city’s strongest draws for the group market: location and great value. “We’re within a four-hour drive of 90 percent of the state’s population,” he says, “and our room rates average 40 to 50 percent less than the state average.”

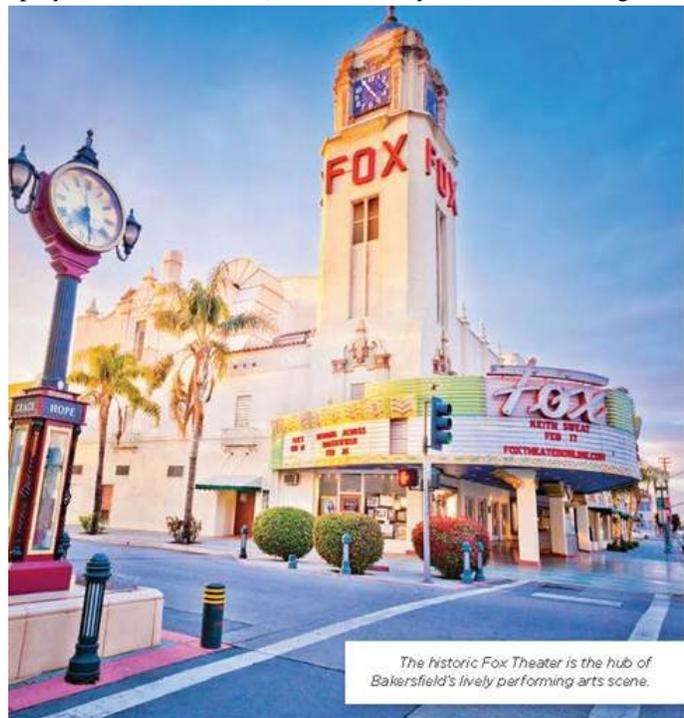
Those assets help make Bakersfield a major player in the SMERF (social, military, educational, religious, fraternal) and sports markets. Groups attracted to Bakersfield run the gamut from pro rodeo and youth sports leagues to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Sweet Adelines, an association of *a capella* enthusiasts whose 1,000 or so attendees fill the town with barbershop harmony during their annual gathering in April.

Speaking of music, Bakersfield is home to the Bakersfield Sound, a sub-genre of country music popularized by legends including Buck Owens, Merle Haggard and, more recently, Dwight Yoakam. **Buck Owens’ Crystal Palace**, a combination concert hall, museum, restaurant, nightclub and gift store, is a popular venue for off-site gatherings. Another is the elegantly restored 1,500-seat **Fox Theater**, an acoustically acclaimed historic gem that serves as the city’s performing arts hub.

Other cultural institutions available for gatherings include the **Bakersfield Museum of Art**, which offers indoor banquet facilities as well as outdoor space in its shady sculpture garden, and the **Kern County Museum**, which can accommodate groups from 50 to 5,000 on its 16-acre campus.

For large meetings and conventions, Bakersfield’s **Rabobank Arena, Theater and Convention Center** offers more than 70,000 square feet of meeting and event space, including a 29,500-square-foot exhibition hall and 13 breakout rooms. The theater is a 3,000-seat venue, while the arena seats 10,000. The venues are connected via indoor walkway to the **Bakersfield Marriott**, which offers 9,126 square feet of additional event space, including a ballroom that can accommodate 900 guests. Besides the convention center, the city’s largest full-service hotel with meeting space is the 262-room **Doubletree by Hilton Bakersfield**, featuring a 12,000-square-foot ballroom and a dozen breakout venues. A bit farther out is the 200-room **Four Points by Sheraton**, with 6,800 square feet of banquet and function space.

When it comes to off-site dining, Billingsley says that many planners opt to introduce their attendees to Basque cuisine, which is served family-style at classic venues such as **Wool Growers** and the **Noriega Hotel**. “One of Bakersfield’s claims to fame is that we have more Basque restaurants than any other city in the country,” he says.



The historic Fox Theater is the hub of Bakersfield's lively performing arts scene.

Photo credit Gilbert Vega