

NORTHWEST MEETINGS & EVENTS



Profile: Natural Inspiration

By Kathryn Brockman

Midnight tee times, helicopter glacier landings, Iditarod dog races, trophy-catch reel-'n'-grills, wilderness salmon bakes and wildlife sightings found nowhere else on earth. Wow! It's no wonder businesses that hold their meetings in Alaska can expect a 20- to 30-percent increase in attendance, attests Karen Zak, general manager of Visions Meetings, Events and Incentives in Anchorage, Alaska.

"Once participants learn Alaska is the meeting locale, they immediately plan to bring their families and make a vacation out of their conference," says the 25-year travel and hospitality industry veteran. She did the same thing — and more.

Zak and her husband, Bryan, made a no-regrets lifestyle change and moved from Washington, D.C., to the "Upper 50th," where she manages one of the state's most prolific meeting planner companies.

Her company draws upon Alaska's overwhelming beauty, hospitality and sense of unmatched adventure as a definitive meeting lure. Working from a storefront office with a picture-window backdrop of snow-topped mountains and aureorean evening skies, Zak and her five staff members orchestrate striking events for clients, ranging from small 50-person incentive groups to 600-participant conferences.

Seated around their conference-room fireplace, the team keeps up a super-cool, supercharged pace, planning myriad details for conferences, incentives and meetings year-round. Zak customizes clients' programs, negotiates with

suppliers, arranges participant transportation, coordinates event registration, plans on-site and VIP services, and tracks and processes all documents. Each client is assigned a start-to-finish lead meeting planner aided by an administrative assistant.

In the bag: a 200-person event, normally accomplished with a six- to eight-month leadtime, spun out in 24 business days. Coming up: a 30-day, 60-country international meeting for next year, and several other weekly events in between.

Since its 1998 debut as a business complement of USTravel, Anchorage, the firm has shined brightly in this land of the midnight sun, where Zak's event-planning turnstile rotates with both inbound and outbound business groups for 11 consecutive months.

From January to March, she arranges Alaskan companies' incentive escapes to tropical beaches and the Australian Outback. From March to May and September to November, she juggles both out-of-state and in-state conferences and conventions. June to August, it's the best of Alaska for groups that come to enjoy the warmer weather and 20 hours of daylight. Her turnstile halts in December for family business, then the cycle begins anew.

From show decorators to entertainers, indigenous-fare caterers, deluxe Hummer limousines and unique meeting venues that include exotic parks, a zoo and a heritage center, Alaska's largest little city, with more than 250,000 residents, is bursting at the seams with incoming business.

"Company representatives are blown away by all we have to offer in our compact, metropolitan city," says Zak, which includes the 215,000- square-foot, 5,000-seat Egan Civic & Convention Center. Yet, 20 minutes from Anchorage, visitors enjoy uncivilized experiences in Alaskan nature, which Zak nurtures as a must-do for her clients.

No matter how crafted the event, Mother Nature is the main attraction in this Arctic Circle state. Zak relies on her can-do Alaska network of on-location hospitality veterans, who make sure "clients definitely have a positive memorable experience they will talk about," she says.

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