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Forced Fun at Conferences: Hard Pass or All In?

With business travel back, the split returns between employees who love karaoke and pickleball and those who very much don't



ILLUSTRATION: FRANCESCO ZORZI



By [Dawn Gilbertson](#)

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Key Points

What's This?

- Conferences are back with a heaping side of scheduled fun, including karaoke, pickleball, yoga, casino night, guided hikes and lazy river races.
- Attendees debate the value of these activities, with some seeing them as priceless networking opportunities and others finding them cringey and forced.
- Conference organizers say group activities are a critical part of the mix, offering a relief from keynotes, panels, and endless breakout sessions.

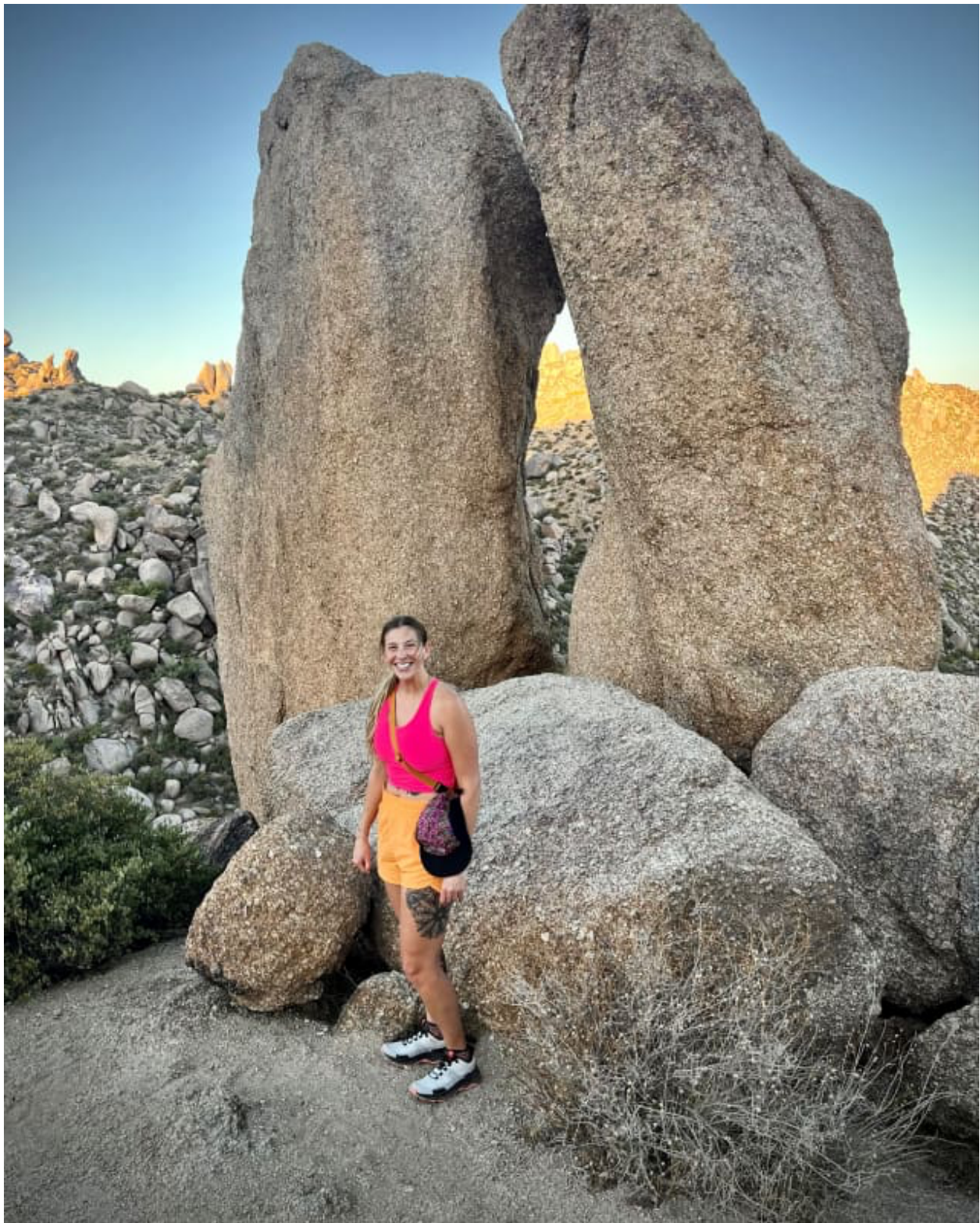
PHOENIX—The conference at the 950-room JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort in early October had everything hotel industry folks could want: Panels with the CEOs of Marriott, Motel 6 and Wyndham. Outlooks on the economy, room rates and travel trends.

And an inner-tube race in the pool.

[Conferences and corporate retreats](#) are back, and with them the heaping side of scheduled fun. Scan the lineup for your next conference. Beyond the usual happy hours and golf outings, there's karaoke, pickleball, yoga, casino night, guided hikes and, yes, lazy river races.

It's reinvigorating the age-old debate for attendees: Just how all-business are you? Are these conference extras a priceless chance to meet a prospective client or new employer outside the hotel ballroom—or cringey, forced fun that could even land you in the HR office or urgent care?

Elyse Kirby, a national relationship manager for a company that helps property owners navigate insurance claims, is a fan. She has been to eight conferences this year. In North Carolina, she signed up for goat yoga and a walking tour. At the Lodging Conference in Phoenix this month, she flew in early for a guided 6 a.m. hike in the Sonoran Desert the first day of the conference. She was initially on a wait list and kept calling for a spot to open up.



Elyse Kirby recently signed up for a 6 a.m. hike at Tom's Thumb in Scottsdale, Ariz. PHOTO: MEG TAICLET

The Nashville resident calls the activities outside the regular sessions crucial. She switched jobs this year and was the only person in her company at the Phoenix

conference. By the time the opening session occurred, she had connected with an architect, a financier and someone who makes stainless steel pools for hotels.

“Meeting people for more than two seconds at the bar allowed me to have a connection, even if we had no business synergies,” she says.

It isn’t hard to find [online grumbling](#) about the dawn-to-closing-time agendas at conferences and conventions. Plenty of business travelers are happy to retreat to their room or a local restaurant after the day’s closing session.

Janice Chaka, a Boston-based career coach for introverts, has no problem with conference activities as long as they’re optional. She tells her clients to draw up a plan before the conference.

“It’s finding a balance of which events you can attend while also getting downtime to recharge,” she says.

Two words that will automatically cross any activity off her conference to-do list: team building.

Boosting business travel

Travel management company Navan this week said conference attendance is helping [business travel return](#) to near prepandemic levels. Conference travel accounted for 15% of business travel year-to-date, up from 12% in 2019, the company says.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you feel about “mandatory fun” at work conferences? Join the conversation below.

Meeting planners say social activities rank fourth among factors that make conferences memorable for attendees, according to American Express Global Business Travel’s 2025 forecast. The top three: content, venue and destination. Attendees want “valuable insights and actionable takeaways that enrich their professional lives,” according to the report, published in early October.

But conference organizers say group activities are a critical part of the mix, offering a relief from keynotes, panels and endless breakout sessions. Call them ice breakers or laid-back networking.

Harry Javer founded and puts on the annual Lodging Conference. This year nearly 3,000 attendees paid about \$3,000 each to attend the three-day event. Most of its activities fill up.

Javer says he likes his event to be known as the fun conference. The inner-tube race, which premiered last year at the resort's lazy river attraction, grew out of a popular rubber duck race at the conference. Participation doubled this year, to about 60 people, he says. This despite a change in the rules to make it a more lazy float. Attendees couldn't just walk through the lazy river with a tube around them.

"You had to have your butt in the tube," he says.





Conference organizers say social activities are a great way for attendees to informally connect.
GARY KANE (2)

Not everyone wants business colleagues to see them in swimsuits. Javer says that the events are all optional. He doesn't like the terms "forced fun" or "mandatory fun."

"It's not like 95% of the people do it and if you don't do it you're left out," he says.

Under consideration for next year: inviting conference goers to rappel off a building. (His insurance company said no, but he has found an outfitter who is covered.)

Fancy a cigar?

Chris McChesney attends lots of conferences as a financial-services executive. The industry doesn't get as creative as others do, but the Boston executive says he's seen an increase in optional activities. They include cigar rolling, cooking demonstrations and wine tasting. And he says casino nights with play money are growing in popularity as betting has gone mainstream. These events can be part of the main conference or side events sponsors throw to get attendees' attention.

"Maybe no one's really feeling inspired by another cocktail party," he says.

He'll play golf occasionally when there's time and did a wine tasting at a conference in Washington, D.C. Karaoke is a no-go. And anything in a swimsuit. Yoga, too, because the skimpy clothing "might come close to violating my no-swimsuit thing."

Pickleball is also off the table: “One of my other rules might be nothing where I could tear my ACL.”

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