

What You Can Expect at the 2011 NALP Conference in Palm Desert . . . Besides the Great Programming!

by Mandie Araujo LeBeau

I'll be the first to admit it: Before registering for the NALP Annual Education Conference I like to conduct a little research on the venue and the surrounding area. I want to know: (1) what to expect and (2) what I have to look forward to. The conference is my primary source of professional development, and while I anticipate the great schedule of educational programs, I also look forward to reconnecting with my colleagues, visiting a new place, and sampling the local cuisine.

In June, I participated as a Regional Coordinator in the Conference Planning Committee meeting at the JW Marriott Hotel in Palm Desert, CA. This gave me the special advantage of visiting our next conference location. If you are a "planner" like me, then you may appreciate this sneak peek at what you can expect in Palm Desert.

Travel: Getting to Palm Desert is easy. There are three airports nearby. You may want to check out all three options for the best flight fares and schedules: Palm Springs International Airport (PSP) is a short 25-minute drive to Palm Desert; Ontario International Airport (ONT) is a one-hour drive to Palm Desert; and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) is a two-hour drive to Palm Desert. If you are driving during rush-hour times, then you may need to factor in additional time for traffic. If you prefer not to drive, then flying to the Palm Springs International Airport is the best option. The airport is small. It took me only about 15 minutes to get off the plane, collect my checked bag, and locate a taxi. I happened to see other NALP members in the airport and six of us shared a taxi-van for \$40 plus tip (about \$8 per person).

Weather: According to www.weather.com, the average temperature for Palm Desert in April is around 87 degrees. The desert heat is dry and comfortable. A taxi driver told me that Palm Desert averages only six days of rain per year, so the chances of having beautiful weather during our conference are certainly in our favor. Be sure to bring your shades and your sunscreen.

Venue: Palm Desert is located in the heart of southern California's Coachella Valley. Once you arrive you can't help but notice the beautiful majestic desert mountain views that surround you. And despite being in the desert, the landscape is green and lush. It is truly breathtaking.

Dining: Two words: good food. I can honestly say that I did not have one bad meal during my four-day stay at the conference hotel. Our breakfasts and lunches came from the hotel, and everything I ate was delicious. Fingers crossed, the same good food will be served during our conference.

The hotel property features several dining options. There is a Starbucks in the main lobby, and it has three cash registers. Yea, hopefully no long lines! There are four restaurants on site: Mikado (Japanese Steakhouse), the Lake View Restaurant (American), the Lobby Bar (sushi and snacks), and the Oasis Bar and Grille (sandwiches and salads). Dinner is about \$40 to \$75 per person. The breakfast buffet is about \$25 per person. Continental breakfast will be provided at this conference. There are a few restaurants located outside of the main entrance of the resort, in addition to a grocery store and a convenience store. There are also

more dining options on El Paseo in Palm Desert, which is a five-minute drive (or a \$10 cab ride) or in downtown Palm Springs, which is a 20-minute drive (or \$40 cab ride).

Meeting Spaces: Nice. Spacious. Clean. Bring a sweater because the air conditioning does get very chilly. If you want to meet up with colleagues, the main lobby area has plenty of nice sofas and chairs that provide a great setting for conversation.

Accommodations: The JW Marriott is a four-star hotel located on 400 acres. The hotel has comfortable standard rooms with upscale marble bathrooms. Each room has a balcony with an outdoor sitting area. My room was a suite and it was very spacious. It had a walk-in closet, a little sitting area with a sofa, and a balcony with a view of the pool and mountains.

Amenities: The hotel property has two golf courses, tennis courts, lawn games (badminton, bocceball, croquet, soccer, frisbee, and horseshoes), a spa, a gym, and a fitness center that offers exercise classes. There is a huge pool that spans the center of the property and a couple of smaller pools located on the side. There are plenty of lounge chairs and places to sit around the pools.

The hotel has a cute little boat that transports you around the property and inside the lobby. You can enjoy a boat ride to dinner, or if you get too full from dinner you can enjoy a boat ride back to the lobby. There are several nice gift shops to visit in between NALP programs. And there is a night club (Costa's) on site for those who enjoy a little music and dancing in the evening.

When you check in you will be asked if you want to add a \$25 daily resort fee to your reservation. It was tough for me to make this decision because I didn't know if I would be using the items that the fee covered. To help you out, I will tell you in advance. The optional resort fee includes usage of high-speed Internet in your room/wireless in lobby, unlimited local calls, self-parking (not valet), fitness center access, all lawn games, mini golf, golf bag storage, and evening turndown service with two bottles of water (a total \$71.95

value). It is worth it if you are going to be using two or more of these items. Otherwise, each item has a separate charge.

Local Attractions: There are several must see attractions in the Palm Desert area, including the Living Desert and Joshua Tree National Park for the nature lovers; shopping on El Paseo (the "Rodeo Drive of the Desert"), in Desert Hills factory outlets, and in downtown Palm Springs for the shoppers; championship rated golf and tennis courses for the athletic; riding the tram to the top of Mount San Jacinto for the fearless; touring the art and culture museums and outdoor exhibits for the artsy; relaxing at the desert spas for those in need of rejuvenation; and playing games at the local casinos for the lucky!

NALP Events: I don't want to give it all away, so I'll just mention a few clues about the NALP conference events you can look forward to: yoga on the lawn, a fun morning walk/run around the hotel's 3.1-mile property, scenic outdoor locations for the conference favorites (i.e., the member celebration and diversity reception), and fun social/networking activities for everyone.

For more information on Palm Desert and the conference hotel visit www.palm-desert.org, www.desertspringsresort.com, and www.tripadvisor.com. (You will be able to reserve your accommodations at NALP's special rates as part of the conference registration process, so don't try to register directly, but it's not too early to learn about our next venue!) I hope to see you in April at the 2011 NALP Annual Education Conference in Palm Desert. I will be the one wearing my shades, carrying a sweater to the next NALP program, and hitching a ride on the cute little boat!

Mandie Araujo LeBeau is Director of Career Services at New England Law | Boston. This article was submitted on behalf of the Annual Education Conference Planning Committee.