

Go for the BIG WIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW FEARMAN

A well-planned meeting can make an enormous impression

Organizing a big meeting is a bit like skiing: just because you can manage the basics, doesn't mean you're ready for a double-black-diamond run.

And for attendees, there's a huge difference between a meeting that thrills and one that feels like a slow day on the bunny slopes.

"An off-site meeting or a conference might revolve around the business being

discussed, but there's a lot more you need to consider," says Kirsti Suutari, marketing director of Alpine Ski Club.

"A single day or weekend can involve team building, networking, making people feel appreciated, letting them relax... and there's always a bit of showbusiness involved. You need people to be entertained, to have fun."

A case in point was a recent gathering of people from

a large financial services company. Top performers from around the world came to Alpine Ski Club to hear the latest news from the financial sector, and to meet and network with their colleagues.

It was a successful conference, but for many guests the highlight was something that didn't bear directly on the week's purpose: a casino night. "We brought in professional dealers and croupiers, and transformed our space into

a luxury casino," says Kim Giffen, facility and events manager. "We issued play money to all the attendees, and watched the fun unfold."

"Oh my goodness, they were so competitive!" Kirsti adds. "The dealers were terrific, and the guests had an amazing time."

An activity like that can turn a meeting into a double-black-diamond run, the kind where attendees go home already looking forward to the next year's event.

"We love it when a conference planner wants us to do something that's never been done," says Kim. "Our focus is on finding out what the organizers want, and then using our contacts and creativity to make it happen."

Built for conferences
Of course, a great event isn't just about play. Most conferences or off-site meetings have a work element to them as well. That's where the building itself becomes particularly important.

When the members at Alpine Ski Club decided to design a new clubhouse, they didn't just look for a space that could house all the members in winter. The stunning structure, which opened for the 2017 ski season, was also designed to host meetings and events.

There are numerous breakout rooms and meeting spaces, as well as a grand hall where hundreds can gather. Natural light floods most of the spaces. There are stunning views – ski hills and woodlands in one direction and Georgian Bay in the other – to help keep everyone's spirits high through even the most serious discussions.

The space is only ever rented to one group at a time. "If you've rented the building, then it's yours – you won't be bumping up against another group or seeing attendees get confused about which breakout session is their company's," says Kirsti.

A top location for meetings
The timing for the new clubhouse couldn't be better,

because Collingwood-Blue Mountains is fast becoming an international destination for conferences and other off-site meetings.

Event activators are attracted by the region's natural beauty, of course, and the wide range of play activities available. In between meetings and workshops, participants can go sailing or mountain biking, challenge a ropes course, play a round of golf, or relax at a spa.

"There are all kinds of activities and events taking place in this region," says Kim. "Whether it's done on our property or at a nearby facility, there's never a problem coming up with a great team-building activity or fun afternoon event."

Making use of neighbouring business offerings is a natural fit, not just for Alpine Ski Club but for other companies in the area. "We have the largest room in the region, a spot where hundreds can gather under one roof," says Kim. "So sometimes organizers will hold part of their event at one site and come to us for their grand banquet."

Similarly, Alpine Ski Club will reach out to other hospitality providers to book sleeping quarters for attendees. "The bed base here is huge. And shuttle services can be arranged to get people from one site to another," says Kirsti.

On-site meals are catered by award-winning Men With Knives, the same company that provides winter meals to the discerning skiers who own Alpine Ski Club. But if other culinary events are desired as part of the conference – a beer tasting, or a wine and cheese pairing workshop, for example – Men with Knives and their team can help arrange it.

This kind of personalized service comes naturally to the staff at a top-flight private ski hill (this year Alpine was named one of the top nine private ski resorts in the world by CNN Travel, and was named Club of the Year by Alpine Ontario Alpin).

"From May to November, we offer our guests the same level of experience as we offer our members," says Kim. "At any time of year, our focus is on how we can help you get what you want." **DS**

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