



The new \$96 million
CaixaForum Madrid museum



THE CULTURE CAPITALS

Learn how to joust, tango, discuss Picasso, corner a Porsche and eavesdrop like a KGB spy in the world's great cities from Buenos Aires to Berlin. We have some fun ideas about shopping for handbags at Henri Bendel, too.

Greg Oates



were “knockout necklaces and bold handbags,” according to Henri Bendel’s boutique department store. An expert at such things, Carrie Gjermundsen is owner of **Style Guide NYC Tours**, who can help corporate groups navigate Manhattan’s fashion scene including Bendel’s and Bergdorf’s, like she did this year for Oracle. However, her most requested tours explore NYC’s sartorial side streets.

“These are not about shopping to the hilt, it’s more about feeling the energy of New York and the different neighborhoods,” says Gjermundsen. “I really give people a lot of fun insider knowledge.” Many of her corporate clients are “middle-of-the-road fashion-wise” and budget conscious, she adds. “So I show where you can find the most value and what’s hip and trendy. I’m like your best friend in New York.”

The Meatpacking District tour is often requested because there are so many stores close together. And the popular French brasserie **Pastis** and Vongerichten’s **Spice Market** are perfect for wine and appetizers. She likes taking groups up to 20 at a time into Nolita, NoHo and The Bowery because they’re quiet in the afternoon and there’s a wealth of shops tourists would never discover.

A lot of buzz too. Last year, sportswear mogul John Varvatos moved into the landmark CBGB bar where American punk was born. The \$2,000 jackets are new but it still looks like a Sex Pistols crash pad with the graffiti, bar and old

vintage stereo equipment preserved. Gjermundsen caters to both all-female and co-ed groups, and she says executives in sales and marketing tell her they learned a lot from her tours about cutting-edge branding from the fashion elite.

When big-budget groups do want to shop for big label glitz, Gjermundsen escorts everyone to famous designer digs such as Catherine Malandrino’s shop in SoHo, ending with drinks at the celeb-fave **Soho Grand Hotel**.

WASHINGTON DC

Busboys & Poets is one of those coffeeshop restaurants where liberal arts grad students drink too much coffee and read too much existential French Lit, while a slightly unhinged soul reads poetry on stage to a disaffected crowd.

Except this is U Street in Washington DC, and the poets are published in *Harvard Review*. The grad students are on Fulbrights, and that’s Ralph Nader, Matt Dillon and Al Franken in the crowd sipping properly made, northern Italian espresso. The U Street corridor is the creative knife edge in the nation’s capital, and *The Washington Post* proclaims Busboys as the “best bar for flying solo” and the “best restaurant for groups.” The 14th Street establishment offers private spaces for 75, 60, 18 and 150 people.

“Sometimes we’ll say around here, I’m not sure if I’m cool enough to go to U Street because it’s so hip and trendy,” jokes Michelle Mobley, account director of marketing/events for **VRS Meetings & Events**. “You know, everyone knows the **Smithsonian**, and it’s great—all the museums are free and there’s an amazing amount to see and do. So in these economic times it’s a great way for groups to save money, but we try to add even more value by doing insider tours, too.”

Mobley points out the year-old **Newseum**, where she’ll get small groups into *This Week* with George Stephanopoulos and David Gregory’s *Meet the Press*. She says her corporate groups enjoy those shows because they’re “exposed to both sides of the aisle.” The Newseum showcases a slew of Pulitzer-prize winning photos and editorial achievements.

She also recommends the **International Spy Museum** and spy tours traveling down Embassy Row. Retired ex-CIA and KGB secret agents ruminate on their past espionage

skullduggery for groups up to 50, showing where they made secret drops and reconnoitered with “assets.” The museum itself hosts private dinners for up to 100.

Other experiences Mobley promotes is lunch at The Capitol Building where groups can sometimes engage the more loquacious senators. Check out **The Capitol Visitor Center**, which reopened in December following a \$60 million renovation. The locals are big on the **Corcoran Museum**, with fun exhibits like the Jackie O wardrobe collection. And Mobley’s fave venue is the newly refurbished **Ford’s Theater**, where Lincoln was gunned down in 1865. Groups can book private performances of visiting shows like this winter’s *Christmas Carol*.

Here’s the “get.” If your group is international, check with the foreign divisions to see if they can hook up a private VIP reception at one of their respective embassies, many of which are housed in mansions lining Massachusetts Ave. It doesn’t happen often, but cachet is through the roof when it does.

Anything else, Michelle?

“Well, everyone wants the private docent tours in the Smithsonian, which we do all the time,” she says. “And tea in the Rose Garden, of course.”

No way. Groups can do that?

“Uh, no. Planners can ask all they want but unless you’re a personal friend of Michelle Obama, it’s not happening. And if you are, you should introduce me!”

Spain Tourism Board; spain.info

Madrid Convention Bureau; esmadrid.com

Spain Incentives & Meetings Association; sima.es

German Convention Bureau; gcb.de

Berlin Convention Office; visitberlin.de

v. Beust & Partner Incentives; vonbeust-partner.de

Czech Tourism USA; czech.cz

Prague Convention Bureau; pragueconvention.cz

Incoming Marketing Services; ims-vienna.com

Destino Argentina Tourism; destinationargentinian.com

Argentina Travel Partners; atpdm.com

Argentina en Colores; argentinaencolores.com

Uniquely Singapore, visitsingapore.com

Resorts World Sentosa; rwsentosa.com

New York City & Co.; nycgo.com

PRA Management NYC; pra.com

Style Guide NYC Tours; styleguidenyc.com

Destination DC; washington.org

VRS Meetings & Events; vrsevents.com



Long before the hotel industry went “designer,” there was the Berlin-based portfolio of style-conscious properties: **Design Hotels**. Located in 40 countries around the globe, all of them carry the unique stamp of their “Originals”—the owners.

Such as Mark Fuller, former manager for heavy metal band Iron Maiden. His **Sanctum Soho Hotel** in West London with rooftop hot tubs, private bar and guitar concierges is designed to be “the ultimate rockstar apartment.” Check out the newly refurbished historic cinema for 80-person receptions.

But we’re curious. Does a creatively designed hotel inspire creative thinking?

“Our hotels, by the nature of their design and the people behind them are often the meeting point of ideas, creativity and cutting-edge culture,” says Claus Sendlinger, CEO and founder. “Our member hotels are often a gateway to the local culture.”

How does the creative energy at your Berlin hotels **Lux 11** and **The Mandala** align with the city’s cultural zeitgeist?

“Lux 11 is located in Mitte, an area which has attracted artists and creative types from all over the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Mandala is located in Potsdamer Platz, where many major German and international companies have their headquarters. However, its Michelin-starred restaurant Facil, rooftop spa ONO, and Qui cocktail lounge are favorite hangouts of locals.”

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