

SAA Site Planning

Memo from the Executive Director

The most important criterion for the SAA conference is a hotel with the right combination of meeting spaces: a ballroom large enough for our plenary session and banquet luncheon, but also a number of smaller rooms for seminars and workshops. As the SAA has grown larger, so, too, has the number of its seminars. In 2008, the SAA recommitted itself to enrollment caps of no more than sixteen members per seminar. The result has been a steadily enlarging program: from 40 seminars and workshops for 2008 to 56 for 2014. Each seminar requires a meeting room, and more seminars mean more meeting rooms. The Fairmont Dallas Hotel, which was large enough for us in 2008, is not large enough for us in 2014.

In any town with more than one option for suitable meeting spaces—and often when choosing between towns, too—room rate is the deciding factor. The SAA does not have the same bargaining power as the MLA, which books hundreds more guest rooms than we do, but we work hard to maintain our history of affordable lodgings in attractive destinations. Hotel room rates are an especially urgent concern at present, as so many universities reduce travel support.

Two out of three years we meet on Easter weekend. This policy was adopted because Easter is such a slow time in the travel industry that we are able to negotiate especially low hotel room rates in “top-tier” destinations. Passover does not feature in industry calculations; conflicts are an unfortunate casualty of the fact that the two holidays sometimes coincide. Our three-year rotation recognizes those with religious and family conflicts on Easter and, because the holidays often overlap, Passover.

Our room rate for Vancouver will be \$135 per night with 15% added taxes. The rule of thumb has been that the same hotel on another weekend would charge an additional \$90 to \$100 per night. For current negotiations on the contract for an upcoming conference, I recently re-checked the differential. It now stands at \$130 per night less on Easter weekend. The differences between Easter and non-Easter weekends play out as follows:

Easter	at \$155.25 (\$135 plus 15%) for three nights, \$465.75; for four nights, \$621.00
\$130 more	at \$304.75 (\$265 plus 15%) for three nights, \$914.25; for four nights, \$1,219.00

When we changed the conference schedule to open on Thursday mornings (about which, more below), the trustees and I also talked about the fact that we were imposing on many SAA members the added cost of a fourth night in the conference hotel. We recognized that this places further pressure on our hotel rates.

The SAA’s rate history was curated by my predecessor Nancy Elizabeth Hodge, who negotiated the contract for my first conference in 1997, for \$99 per night at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Our Vancouver rate represents a rise of \$36 across eighteen years. This rate history is our best negotiating tool with conference hotels because hotel salespersons request, review, and respect evidence of our members’ expectations. If we were to go to a top-tier destination in a non-Easter year and pay a room rate of, say, \$250, we would not be able to return to \$135 even on an Easter year because we would have breached that history.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, which had such serious consequences for the travel industry, I arranged forward bookings aggressively. Thus, we were able to maintain a flat rate for six years.

\$130 for Washington, D.C. in 2009

\$129 for Chicago in 2010

\$130 for Bellevue in 2011

\$129 for Boston in 2012

\$130 for Toronto in 2013

\$130 for St. Louis in 2014

\$135 for Vancouver in 2015

\$139 for New Orleans in 2016

\$140 for Atlanta in 2017

The SAA is regularly approached by convention planning companies who offer to do site planning and hotel contracting for us (for a fee). When they review our history, however, they admit that they cannot do better, even despite their industry contacts. This is because our rate history and planning policy have been maintained with consistency across several decades.

For a group of our size, our Easter-weekend rates are by industry standards so low that our biggest challenge is to find a hotel that will match them in a non-Easter weekend. In past years, we met in Canada on non-Easter weekends because the exchange rate allowed us to sustain the rate history in U.S.-dollar terms. When the two currencies achieved parity a few years ago, we lost that advantage. The search for a non-Easter meeting site has thus become more difficult. In recent years, we have met on non-Easter weekends in Dallas because the city does not have the hotel inventory to be competitive for larger conventions, in Bellevue because the recession had a disproportionate impact on a suburban hotel that had undertaken an expansion at just the wrong moment, and in St. Louis because the recession was sufficiently severe to have caused a series of hotel closings. Many other second-and even third-tier cities would demand room rates about fifty percent higher than those we negotiate on Easter weekends. In Dallas, Bellevue, and St. Louis, it happened that we required overflow housing. The problem of locating additional rooms had less to do with room availability than with the difficulty finding hotels willing to match our low rates. There are generally more overflow options on Easter weekends, when area hotels are emptier.

For our most recent D.C. conference, the hotel manager thanked us for one thing in particular: we made it possible for her to call in her staff for the week before Easter. The service workers who clean our guest rooms, set up our meeting spaces, staff the bars and restaurants, and cater our events otherwise go without wages for those low-occupancy days.

We always prefer to contract with hotels whose staffs are unionized. In cities with options, this is a deciding factor in hotel selection. Some hotel representatives flaunt their non-union status as an incentive, but it is an economy I have refused.

Hotel sales managers are so eager to find Easter business that they are often willing to offer additional concessions to secure it. This is how I was able to negotiate free wireless access on conference weekend, for example. Non-Easter hotels have since been forced to match the expectations that we were able to establish with Easter negotiations.

My contract negotiations also involve securing a sufficient inventory of two-bedded rooms. Even with rates that we keep as low as possible, there are still many SAA members who cannot easily pay the full hotel fee and who reduce costs by room-sharing.

SAA conference attendance is always lower in non-Easter years, for several reasons. First, non-Easter destinations are less attractive. Second, travel arrangements for non-Easter destinations tend to be more expensive and/or to involve more difficult connections. Third, many SAAers find travel more difficult without the Easter breaks scheduled at a number of schools in the U.S. and elsewhere. For SAA members who teach outside North America, international travel on a non-Easter weekend can be impractical. The attendance statistics break down as follows:

2006	Philadelphia	Easter	651
2007	San Diego	Easter	715
2008	Dallas	non-Easter	647
2009	Washington, D.C.	Easter	928
2010	Chicago	Easter	862
2011	Bellevue	non-Easter	783
2012	Boston	Easter	1,012
2013	Toronto	Easter	968
2014	St. Louis	non-Easter	784

Because many SAA members pay membership dues only in years they plan to attend the conference, our dues income drops significantly in non-Easter years.

The second- and third-tier travel destinations also tend to have fewer regional universities to contribute to conference sponsorship. Every year, we rely on local schools to underwrite our Opening Reception and special events. With reduced income in both categories, non-Easter meetings have an adverse impact on the financial health of the organization.

In 2012 I was warned by an industry representative that we would have to begin looking at convention centers rather than convention hotels in order to accommodate our seminars and workshops. The Board of Trustees felt that a hotel environment was important to maintain the traditional character of the conference, and in 2013 we added to our usual program of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday afternoon seminars another group of Thursday morning seminars. When we have sixty seminars scheduled in three groups, we need twenty meeting rooms. When we have sixty seminars scheduled in four groups, we need just fifteen meeting rooms. (We had sixty-three seminars in 2013 and fifty-nine in 2014.) The new schedule has given us more hotel options.

Still, many cities classified in the tourism industry as second- and third-tier do not have hotels with ballrooms large enough for our panel sessions and luncheon. A surprising number of cities are entirely ruled out for us because they do not have adequate meeting space. This is also the reason it is not practical for us to use two medium-sized hotels. A hotel with 500 or fewer guest rooms will not have a ballroom of the size we require. We could contemplate renting a room in a convention center just for plenaries and luncheons, but that is not always practical logistically.

In addition, the luncheon is part of the negotiating process with our host hotels. The contract that I sign guarantees not only that we will provide a certain number of guests reserving rooms but also a certain amount of catering business. We have two big-ticket items: our annual reception and our annual luncheon. Unless we hold one (if not both) of these events in our host hotel, we cannot secure our low room rates.

Contracts include a detailed breakdown for program times and spaces. With meetings spaces, as with guest rooms, a hotel balances multiple interests. A hotel will not allow us to reserve all its guest rooms, not only because it needs to serve its repeat clientele but also because it counts on selling some percentage of its rooms at a higher rate than the rate we have negotiated.

By the same token, the hotel holds back some spaces to make board meetings available to small groups or to host weddings and other private events. For us, the hotel waives space rental in consideration of the guest-room and catering business we are bringing; for other parties, the hotel earns added income for space use. This is a balance that hotels are best able to program for in non-Easter years, when they have good luck attracting other, logistically complementary business. We were unusually lucky to have been able to add the Digital Room to our 2014 schedule even though it had not featured in our plans when I signed a contract with the Hyatt Regency St. Louis in 2010. In Easter years, we tend to have access to all available meeting space in a hotel and greater flexibility in using it.

There are further considerations for site planning, but perhaps this gives some sense of the discussions the Trustees regularly engage. (A simple digest is always available on the SAA website: <http://www.shakespeareassociation.org/annual-meetings/how-they-work/>) Tracking all this information over the years, members of the Board have concluded that SAA members vote with their feet. Nonetheless, scheduling was the first issue raised in the self-study we conducted in 2009-2010. (This study sampled 184 members of the Association from all career stages and a variety of institutions.) The majority response from the self-study was that the current policy is a democratic one because it makes the conference affordable for more people.

Nonetheless, the trustees remain concerned about the fact that some people cannot attend on holiday weekends and that some people do so unwillingly. Thus, their decision to meet on Easter weekend for two out of every three years, reserving the third year for those with conflicting commitments. For Passover, the conflict is less frequent. Members of the SAA's Board of Trustees regularly ask themselves whether this is the right compromise. Every SAA policy is open to review and is regularly reconsidered. As I review minutes of the board meetings, I find our current scheduling policy to have been thoroughly reassessed on a roughly biennial basis.

I know I can speak for the Trustees in saying that they take all scheduling concerns seriously and are extremely grateful for the fact that SAA members care enough about the organization to want it to work for them. I hope members know also that I would be happy to address any further questions.

Lena Cowen Orlin
25 November 2014