Biosphere 2's Unique Conference Venue Fosters Creativity, Collaboration in Inspiring Setting

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Sometimes we tend to forget about the marvels in our own backyard. Tucked in the rolling desert hills 30 miles north of Tucson lies a tourist attraction that draws 100,000 visitors each year but might be taken for granted by many on the UA campus: Biosphere 2, named "one of the 50 must see 'Wonders of the World'" by Time Life Books.

While well-recognized as the place "where science lives," Biosphere 2 is not as well-known for its one-of-a-kind conference and event center.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Nirav Merchant, who directs the UA Data Science Institute, known as Data7, and has conducted dozens of workshops at the Biosphere 2 Conference and Retreat Center. "I travel to many conferences across the country, and each time a hosting university shows off their conference center, I think to myself, 'You guys should see the one we have at the UA.'"

Added to the compound in 2010, the conference center has grown substantially, says Event Operations Coordinator Kimberly Land.

"We started with a handful of scientific groups here and there and have since expanded to hosting corporate and private parties, student courses, academic workshops, business retreats, private celebrations, even weddings," says Land, one of several key players working behind the scenes at Biosphere 2.

Biosphere 2's Conference and Retreat Center encompasses meeting rooms of various sizes and 103 bedrooms, distributed across 28 Santa Fe-style casitas.

"This is not your average conference center," Land says. "We lend ourselves well to groups that are looking for creative interaction and networking off the beaten path. What sets us apart is that, as a participant, you are surrounded by what you came here to learn."

Originally built as an ambitious experiment to simulate a "second, mini-Earth" designed to support a crew of "Biospherians" and enabling their survival without a connection to the outside world, the facility was donated to the University of Arizona in 2011 and has since seen a complete refocusing of its purpose. Today, UA scientists take advantage of Biosphere 2's biomes, ranging from desert to savannah to ocean and a full-grown rainforest, all enclosed under glass and steel, to conduct experiments that would not be feasible anywhere else in the world.

Guests staying at the conference center can meet and work in the very locations where history was made, for example the boardroom, which served as the mission control center during Biosphere 2's early days, housing all the administrative staff and the assistants to the
crew. With an intriguing "futuristic retro" feel, it offers a unique setting for meetings and workshops. All conference rooms are equipped with whiteboards, LCD projectors and Wi-Fi.

The center also has worked to develop a uniform pricing structure for all its conference facilities. It is an approved UA service center and can be used by all UA accounts including Sponsored Awards. This helps conference organizers meet the requirements of many federal grants.

The real magic, however, often happens outside the conference and meeting rooms, say veteran users of the Biosphere 2's conference center, such as Merchant.

"You have no idea how productive people become after 5 p.m., once the formal program has ended, if you put them in the right setting," he says. "That's where a lot of the creative work happens, and Biosphere 2 has that vibe and that atmosphere that is very conducive to that process."

While Biosphere 2's location off the beaten path may pose a slight challenge in terms of transportation and logistics, that is also its biggest strength, Land says. Biosphere 2 was explicitly designed for dialogue and discovery, and lacking the distractions surrounding typical conference venues, guests quickly become engaged in what they came for, immerse themselves in the place and connect over the scenic views and a shared sense of isolation.

"Out here, you have no other place to go; even cellphones don't always work," says Merchant. "So, in the evenings, people are sitting around their casitas, asking questions and discussing whatever they've been working on. That's where much of the collaborations and ideas happen."

Vishnu Reddy, an associate professor in the UA's Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, agrees.

"Biosphere 2 is a fantastic location for a scientific conference, because we have very few distractions, and the facilities and staff are world-class," he says. "I have organized meetings for NASA there, and the participants said they want to come back again because they loved the facility and got productive output during their stay."

Guests have the option to enjoy behind-the-scenes tours and guided nature walks, or take advantage of the location's minimal light pollution for a night of stargazing. New programs are added periodically, according to Land, such as the Sonoran Sunrise Experience, where guests go on a 45-minute morning walk and learn about the Sonoran Desert from a Biosphere 2 guide who is well-versed in local natural history.

Boasting more than 100 guest rooms in total, the conference center's casitas have between three and five bedrooms each, most in double occupancy, with a kitchen and a shared living area, as well as Wi-Fi.

"We can sleep groups up to 150 or more," says Land. "Our minimum size for a group is 10 people, typically, but we customize according to individual group needs and help our customers plan a successful event."

"I always enjoy organizing workshops at Biosphere 2," says Sky Dominguez, program coordinator for the UA's Ecosystem Genomics Initiative. "It's my favorite of all, not just because of the location, but also because of the ease of organizing. Whenever I arranged events in other cities, I had to work with five or six different vendors. At Biosphere 2, it's a one-
stop shop that makes it really user-friendly. Kim and her staff are really easy to work with, and they have created many wonderful relationships with vendors, mostly locally owned businesses that offer great options for catering and transportation."

For more information, please visit the Biosphere 2 Conference and Retreat Center [website] or call 520-621-0436.

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