



As gala season begins, a look at the pros and cons of the top hotel venues.

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Where the galas are

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An inside look at the pros and cons of the most popular hotels for fundraisers

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Where's the party?

It's an annual question for nonprofits, and it's no small decision, especially in Chicago. The city has plenty of venues—museums and nontraditional spaces such as River East Art Center and Chicago Illuminating Co.—but most of the high-grossing, prominent fundraisers take place at hotels. Hotels are cost-effective, with built-in catering departments and sufficient staff, not to

mention plenty of tables, chairs and champagne flutes. Nonprofits needn't spend money on an a la carte menu of extras: Just add a year's worth of planning, some stunning centerpieces and voila! Gala.

Even with the city's variety of hotels, from old and traditional (Hilton Chicago, Palmer House Hilton) to hip and contemporary (Radisson Blu Aqua), party planners, and goers, take comfort in returning to the same place every year. "There's a relationship," says Joan Clifford, vice chairman of Good-

man Theatre's board of trustees. Year after year, Goodman holds its spring fundraiser at the Fairmont Chicago Millennium Park and its midyear auction at the Peninsula Chicago; it changes venues only for its opening night pre-performance dinner, scheduled for Sept. 24 this year.

Ms. Clifford, 61, a veteran gala-goer, has her favorites: the Hilton for its beaux-arts beauty and the Peninsula for its privacy.

It's all about gilt at the Palmer House Hilton, one of the city's top spots for galas. Here, a party-goer photographed at the Women's Board Gala for the Joffrey Ballet last spring.

“At the Peninsula, you’re it—you’re the only event,” she says.

For some parties that attract 1,000 or more guests—Chicago Urban League’s annual Golden Fellowship Dinner or Gateway for Cancer Research—a giant hotel is the only option.

“There aren’t that many venues that can hold a seated dinner, a dance floor and band for more than 500 people,” says Ann Marie Arzt, president of EventScape Inc., a Barrington-based event-planning firm. Space and cost explain why few if any galas take place at the smaller and boutique hotels in town, including Trump and Waldorf Astoria Chicago. Such elite hotels “are never built with giant ballrooms,” Ms. Arzt says. “They need to keep the five-star experience a five-star experience.”

And, she says, make no mistake: No matter how compelling the mission or generous the crowd, the venue “can make or break any event,” Ms. Arzt says. “The venue and its staff ultimately hold the keys to success before the doors even open.”

One issue with hotels: They are public places, and therefore ideal for party crashers.

“It’s easy to crash these things when you have 1,000 people coming through registration,” says Sean Cannon, 41, owner of Event Creative, a Chicago-based event design firm. Gala crashers, who dress appropriately and whose aim is to network with the boldface names who actually have purchased gala tickets, are tough to spot and tougher to catch. “They won’t sit at a table and have a plate of food, but they are working the lobby,” Mr. Cannon says.

Here, an insider’s look at some of the most popular hotels for nonprofit galas. Crashers, please disregard.

► **FOUR SEASONS HOTEL CHICAGO**

120 E. Delaware Place

The vibe: With its muted colors, avant-garde flower arrangements and overstuffed furniture, the Four Seasons feels like cocktails and dinner at your rich great-aunt’s house.

Nicest: Coat-check staff. Always quick with a compliment on a bag or coat.

Most interesting: Dinner service. Waiters dole out portions of meat and starch (sometimes a savory bread pudding) from huge silver platters.

Biggest: Desserts. The individual apple crisp at last year’s Chicago Humanities Festival gala could have fed a small dance troupe.

► **HILTON CHICAGO**

720 S. Michigan Ave.

The vibe: Even callow gala-goers feel elegant amid the hotel’s frescoes, gold drapes, massive crystal chandeliers and other beaux-arts touches.

Best: Place for social spying; the vantage point from the balcony ringing the lobby is unbeatable.

Tastiest: Food, from plated salad to bread basket to dessert. Even though it can seat 2,500 for dinner, the Hilton still dishes up top-quality banquet food, thanks to executive chef Mario Garcia, who started at the Hilton as a pot scrubber.

Longest: Trip to the restrooms, especially for guests wearing stilettos. It’s 60 steps to the lobby bathrooms and 75 steps, including two staircases, to the lower-level bathrooms from the International Ballroom.



The Four Seasons’ muted colors, avant-garde flower arrangements and overstuffed furniture feel like dinner at your wealthy aunt’s house.

▶ PALMER HOUSE HILTON

17 E. Monroe St.

The vibe: Gilt, gilt and more gilt—an opulent (and historic) part of yesteryear Chicago. The black-and-white tiled arcade, with a Starbucks and a jewelry store, helps ground the glamour.

Dreamy for: Floral designers. Towering, dramatic centerpieces look stunning in the light, elegant, high-ceilinged ballroom.

Nightmarish for: Gala organizers who want to seat a big dinner crowd quickly. The T-shaped Grand Ballroom creates a bottleneck, especially when the crowd is made up of movers and shakers who want to keep networking.

▶ RADISSON BLU AQUA

221 N. Columbus Drive

The vibe: Cool and contemporary, especially the Atlantic Ballroom and its futuresque-looking chandeliers.

Most impressive: View of the multilevel New East Side neighborhood.

Least impressive: Ballroom entrance. It's a wide swath of concrete that feels more suburban than cosmopolitan.

Trippiest: Bathrooms. Zillions of penny-tile mirrors mean you see yourself a million times over (though there are traditional mirrors for a quick lipstick check). Confusing even if you've only had club soda.

▶ WESTIN RIVER NORTH

320 N. Dearborn St.

The vibe: One hundred percent corporate, from the leaf-patterned, autumn-toned carpet to the potted palms and nondescript paintings.

Best: Place for a social-service organization to really push its mission; the bland ballroom has very few distractions.

Smoothest: Escalators. Gala-goers have to ride down two to get to the ballroom on the lower-lower level.

Worst: Acoustics during cocktail hour. The low-ceilinged, carpeted cocktail room muffles sound and makes conversation possible only at near-shouting levels.

▶ FAIRMONT CHICAGO MILLENNIUM PARK

200 N. Columbus Drive

The vibe: Elegant and upscale in an “anywhere, USA” type way. And quiet.

Best for: Showing off gowns and jewels, thanks to the understated décor.

Worst for: Making an entrance. The stairway up to the smaller second-floor ballroom isn't particularly grand, and guests must ride two escalators down to the bigger lower-level ballroom.