

25 November 2014

SAA policy is to meet on Easter weekend two out of every three years. The 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. Passover does not feature in industry calculations; conflicts are an unfortunate casualty of the fact that the two holidays sometimes coincide.

Our room rate in Vancouver is \$135 per night with 15% added taxes. The rule of thumb is that the same hotel on another weekend would charge an additional \$90 to \$100 per night. For current negotiations on our hotel contract for 2019, 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	\$155.25 (\$135 plus 15%)	for three nights, \$465.75	for four nights, \$621.00
\$90 more	\$258.75 (\$225 plus 15%)	for three nights, \$776.25	for four nights, \$1,035.00
\$100 more	\$270.25 (\$235 plus 15%)	for three nights, \$810.75	for four nights, \$1,081.00
\$130 more	\$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), we 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. My contract negotiations also involve securing a sufficient number 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.

The SAA does not have the same bargaining power as the MLA, which books hundreds more guest rooms than we do. 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 on a non-Easter weekend. Hotel sales managers learn and respect a group's rate history. 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 past years, we met in Canada on non-Easter weekends because the exchange rate allowed us to maintain a consistent 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 as to have caused a series of hotel closings. Many other second- and even third-tier cities would require 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 it 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.

Hotel sales managers are always so eager to find Easter business that they are 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. In general, we find hotels to be more forthcoming and more flexible on Easter weekend. The service workers who clean our guest rooms, set up our meeting spaces, staff the bars and restaurants, and cater our events are grateful to be called in for what are usually low-occupancy days.

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

Guest-room rates are just one consideration in site planning. The SAA requires an unusual amount of meeting space relative to its guest-room use, and our program calls for both several large ballrooms (for our panel sessions and luncheon) and many smaller rooms (for our seminars). 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.

The contract I sign with a convention hotel includes 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 business we are bringing; for other parties, the hotel earns added income for space use. The balance is particularly difficult to achieve in non-Easter years. We were lucky to have been able to add the Digital Room to our 2014 schedule, for example, even though it had not featured in our plans when I signed a contract with the Hyatt Regency St. Louis in 2010.

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. 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 unhappily. 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. There are always trustees who share member concerns about religious observance, family events, or both. As I review minutes of the board meetings, I find our current scheduling policy to have been thoroughly reviewed on a roughly biennial basis, and it 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.) Every SAA policy is open to review and is regularly reconsidered. I know I can speak for the Trustees in saying that they take all these 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 Orlin  
Executive Director