



Giving Buyers More Reason to Sell the South *Board Spotlight*

Kevin Langston, Deputy Commissioner for the tourism division at the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD), recently talked with Travel South about what he is seeing in his home state as well as the South. Kevin has been on the TSUSA Board of Directors since 2007.

What domestic and international trends do you see in the state?

Georgia has seen some of the fastest growth rates in the U.S. when it comes to international visitation. Delta Air Lines has been invaluable in funneling visitors to the South; in addition, we are seeing new trans-Atlantic service from Middle Eastern airlines that is giving us more lift to and from the Indian Subcontinent. Georgia has witnessed double digital growth out of China and India the last couple of years.

In terms of domestic, Georgia has had a spotlight on music and musical heritage sites. Macon, the home of Otis Redding, Allman Brothers and Capricorn Records, and Athens, home of indie rock, have both seen renewed interest. The music scene is thriving in Athens. Tours have been very popular for both destinations.

Walkability has become a hot topic for downtowns; people enjoy walking – they wish to leave the car behind and explore by foot. Downtown Atlanta and Savannah have become very pedestrian-friendly and tourists have noticed the change.

In your travels overseas, what concepts are buyers surprised to learn about the South?

The ease of traveling between the big destinations is surprising to them. We have a terrific highway system that makes it easy to put together a multi-state tour. Often times, buyers have an incorrect picture, or even outdated depiction of our highway system; we educate them on how effortless it is to travel around our twelve states.

By 2020, the Chinese will be the largest group of outbound travelers; what evidence do you see this trend coming to fruition?

We started seeing this bubble up about five years ago. At that time it was mainly Chinese business groups; now, however, we are seeing a rise in FITs (foreign independent travelers) – travelers who are younger, flexible and confident in their English skills; they hop in a car and just explore.

How is marketing to the Asian visitor different than the European one?

The way you market is vastly different. Concentrating on specific Chinese social media sites like WeChat and Weibo is vital; you cannot reach that market through traditional digital means like Facebook or Google ad buys. You have to cater to those sites that see critical mass with the Chinese. Of course, the copy has to be different but also using a different color

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palette is important. The Chinese like vibrant, strong colors, especially red, and a lot of color on the page. They also like to frontload the home page with several copy points – the Chinese websites are heavy on text on their homepage (for an example, visit ctrip.com), unlike the European market. Another point: make sure your product is ready for the Asian traveler. Some of our Atlanta hotels are putting tea pots and slippers in guest rooms. Having congee (rice porridge) in the breakfast buffet is vital.

One piece of advice for suppliers working with tour operators:

Follow-up; meeting folks at a trade show is great but business gets done over the long haul of a relationship. It is not a one-and-done.

One piece of advice for tour operators working with suppliers:

Be adventurous and willing to try new things. The South is full of fantastic tourism product but it is not yet as well known – as a New York, Florida or some of the National Parks. It takes a bit of hard work to find out what appeals to your customer but you will find it in the South.

What words do you have for delegates who are coming to Atlanta for International Showcase?

If you have not been to Atlanta in the last ten years you will find a very different tourist experience; there are more bike lanes and it has become more of a pedestrian city. International Showcase, held at the Marriott Marquis, is in the middle of everything with Centennial Olympic Park and several major attractions within easy walking distance.

For any of our guests who are driving in from our surrounding states, many fantastic opportunities abound to stop along the way and experience some of Georgia's premiere attractions like Lookout Mountain/See Rock City. Also check out Columbus' white water scene; it has the longest urban white water experience in the U.S.

We were the first destination to host International Showcase and I'd be interested in hearing from those who visited the city in 2012 and hear their comments on how the city has changed over the last four years!

Plan your trip to Atlanta
Plan your trip to Georgia