

DELIVERING BUSINESS ESSENTIALS TO NTA MEMBERS

APRIL/MAY 2019

Courier

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PLANNING AHEAD

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Great Lakes

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Courier aims to facilitate member-to-member partnering by spotlighting member product and destinations worldwide, to provide information on current industry trends and issues, and to inform members about NTA initiatives, events and benefits.



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FOOD AND FAITH. No, we're not climbing the alphabet with our features. And we didn't intentionally pair these two topics on our editorial calendar.

But you know, food and faith do go together.

I grew up in a small town, and the well-attended activities at my church were the ones with a meal before, during or after the service or event. I remember surveying an impressive lineup of casseroles, three or four versions of corn pudding and a sea of desserts that included Edna Williams' sinfully delicious caramel icing.

I also remember, as a teenager, a series of after-church dinners that our youth group put on as fundraisers for summer trips. We "worked" those events, you know. My culinary claim to fame was that, with a carefully rolled-up dish towel, I could snap a dinner roll in two. Fun times, right? Fun, violent times.

This issue's (nonviolent) foodie feature showcases signature dishes from seven destinations. Starting on page 21, you'll find images, recipes and back stories for scrumptious appetizers and main courses plus a healthy smoothie bowl for dessert. Kendall Fletcher curated this menu for our magazine. I'd guess I can make five of them (and I can snap all of them in half).

Just as a prayer comes before a meal, our faith feature precedes the provisions. "Footsteps of faith," written by Kay

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Saffari, taps seven Faith Travel Association members for details on the many types of religious journeys that are especially popular with Catholics. It's on pages 16–20. Kay, who is the FTA director, joins the *Courier* crew as a regular contributor. Welcome, welcome!

Our anything-but-new managing editor, Pat Henderson, covers member destinations in this month's Compass section: the U.S. Midwest, pages 26–27, and the South Pacific, pages 33 and 34. And don't miss the roundup of NTA news Pat provides via InBrief, page 8–9.

Kendall combined with Bob Hoelscher (*Courier's* cruise-master contributor) to update you on tours and destinations in Latin America, pages 31–32. And Kendall collected great info on destinations in the area we conveniently call the U.S. West South Central.

All of these stories will be posted on NTAcourier.com by the time you receive your hard copy of the magazine. Pat, Kendall and Senior Marketing Manager Ashley Fish race to prepare the digital edition so you can start sharing articles right away.

This issue also has two business stories that'll interest you if you work with groups (Anybody? ... anybody?) or are interested in packaging Cuba. These articles start on page 10.

The icing on the cake of this food-infused *Courier* is Jenna Aukerman's essay about food's meaning and magnitude in her journeys—both as a traveler and as tour director for Omanson Tour & Travel. Her enthusiasm is contagious and her memories, delicious.

Read on,

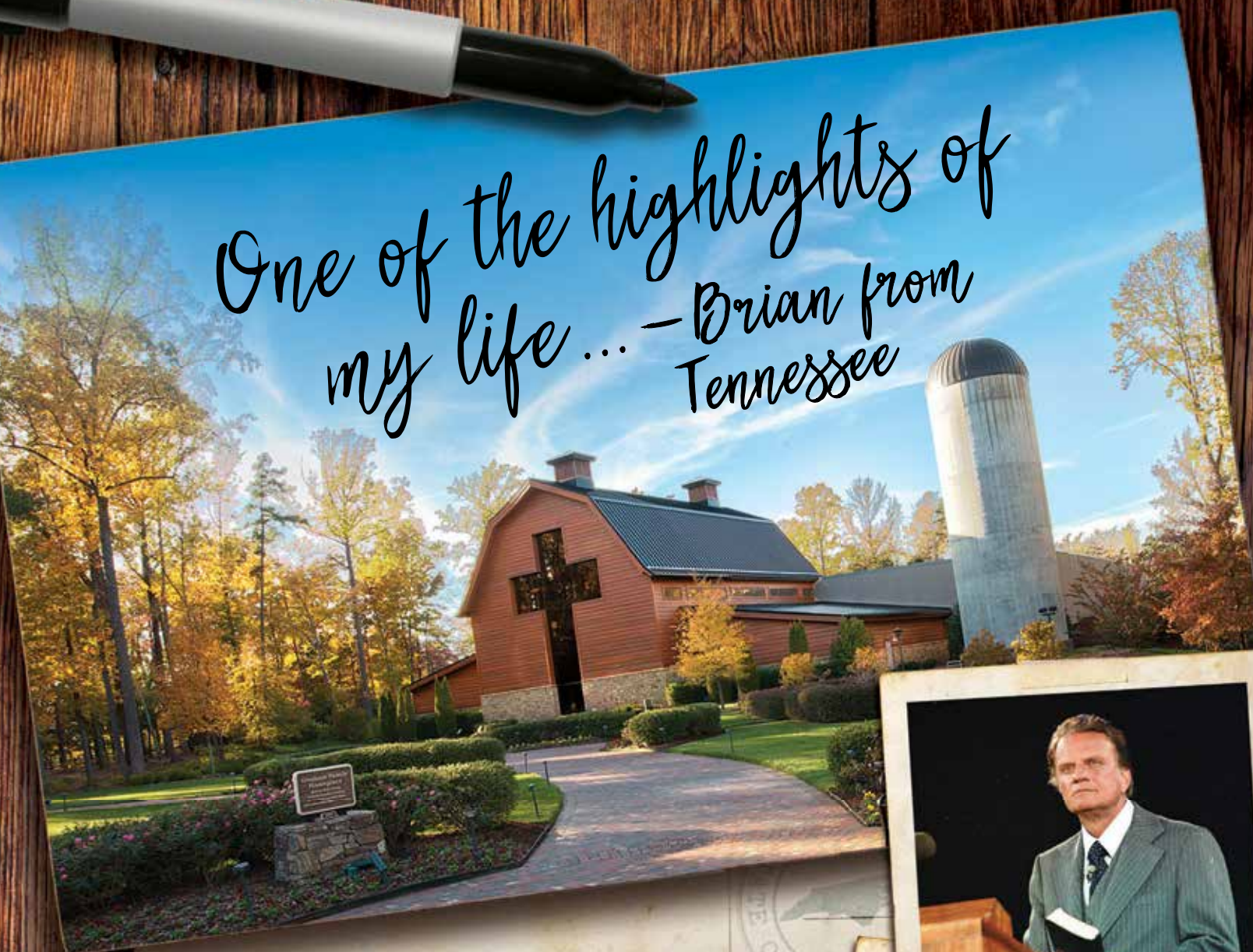
On the cover:

Two visitors to California's Gilroy Garlic Festival get a head start on enjoying the region's favorite flavor. This issue's food feature starts on page 21.

Photo: Scott Jackson



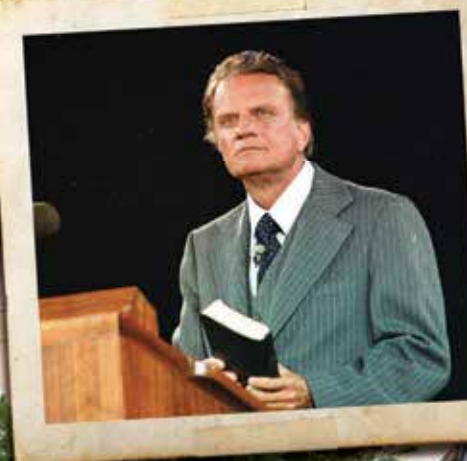
One of the highlights of
my life ... —Brian from
Tennessee



"... The Billy Graham Library was very inspirational and encouraging. It was on my bucket list."

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"Come and see what God has done." —Psalm 66:5, ESV



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Paul Larsen
Chair, NTA Board of Directors
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SINCE BECOMING CHAIR OF NTA, I have been asked on several occasions, “What is your vision?” I say that I envision all of us moving forward together.

Everywhere I look I see new energy. I see staff, leadership and members working together toward a stronger and better NTA, one where more business is done and more relationships are fostered—and where the world is made better through travel.

In January I stopped in Lexington to visit the NTA staff. I was blessed to see an amazing team. My already-elevated admiration for their talents and the work they do multiplied. After a highly successful Travel Exchange in Milwaukee, they are not resting on their laurels but are hard at work building on that momentum.

During January and February, I reached out to your talented board. They come from near and far—Europe, South America and North America—and they believe in the power of travel. They have a range of experience, from NTA veterans to a contingent of young, exciting millennials.

I have also talked to many members, new and old, and I’ve felt a confident optimism in the air and heard a commitment to the future. Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to predict your future is to create it.” That is what we are all doing: impacting our industry and creating a better future together.

When this issue rolls out, we will be in Tucson at Contact ’19. I have already witnessed seeds of business being planted on Engage, NTA’s online community, where members have been introducing themselves and planning to talk further in Contact’s casual setting.

Later this year we will meet in Fort Worth for Travel Exchange. Having recently been at an NTA Meet-up in Fort Worth, I am very excited. The destination itself makes attending worthwhile. Estela Martinez-Stuart and her Visit Fort Worth friends have big plans ... but they’re not the only ones.

In Milwaukee you received a taste of the plans to make TREX better. The pipe-and-drape partitions disappeared, and there was more interaction—and genuine excitement—on the floor.

Milwaukee was the first step, and Fort Worth is next. Suppliers and DMOs have asked for more connections at Travel Exchange, while tour operators have asked for time to attend seminars while carrying a full book of appointments. These are seemingly conflicting desires, but together we will conquer it.

The board and staff have been brainstorming, and your staff has spent unbelievable hours to form plans that take TREX to the next level. Be ready, it’s coming!

You’ll find more excitement, more education and more connections. Be sure to pay attention to the updates. Registration for TREX ’19 opens April 18, and there will be incentives for signing up early.

The year is young, and as I told you in Milwaukee, the reason NTA’s future is bright is “because of all of you—all of us—working together.”

Together we go further!

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InBrief

NEWS AND NOTES ABOUT YOUR ASSOCIATION AND THE INDUSTRY

COMPILED BY PAT HENDERSON

Memphis chosen to host Contact in 2021

Memphis, Tennessee, has been chosen as the site for NTA's 2021 Contact. The announcement came at this year's event in Tucson, Arizona, and means the legendary Tennessee music destination will follow Anchorage, Alaska, which will play host to Contact 2020.

Contact brings together tour operators with sponsoring DMO and tour supplier members for three days focused on education and hands-on learning opportunities across the host city. The Memphis event will take place March 17–20, with the Guest House at Graceland serving as the headquarter hotel. This NTA member, which opened in 2016, is a 450-room luxury

resort located just down the street from Elvis Presley's Graceland.

"We are thrilled to host NTA Contact 2021 in the home of blues, soul and rock 'n' roll," says Colleen Palmertree, national sales manager for Memphis Tourism. "From music to civil rights history to world-famous barbecue, guests will enjoy one-of-a-kind experiences that, as we say, 'Must be Memphis.'"

To learn more, reach out to NTA's Dawn Pettus at dawn.pettus@ntastaff.com or go to ntacontact.com.



Two iconic Memphis experiences are visiting Graceland (left) and enjoying live music on Beale Street.

We get letters: TOTS, WTA and JITOA

NTA provides members with a range of benefits, some of which come from the association's industry partners. Here are updates on three important alliances:

►► The Tour Operator Tech Summit will be held April 24 in New York City in conjunction with North American Journeys' RTO Summit. The event will bring receptive operators together with a curated group of emerging technology providers who have the best products that can help small and midsize tour operators automate their businesses. Because of NTA's co-sponsorship, the association's tour operator members can attend the TOTS event for \$199. To learn more, including seeing the agenda and a registration portal, go to bit.ly/2TioXet.

►► NTA recently joined the World Tourism Alliance, a nonprofit China-based organization that promotes tourism for peace and social progress. WTA members include tourism associations, influential travel enterprises, think tanks and research institutes, as well as leaders of international organizations and established scholars. For more information about the alliance, contact NTA's Lin Wang at lin.wang@ntastaff.com.

►► NTA also has entered into a strategic partnership with the Jordan Inbound Tour Operators Association. JITOA represents inbound tourism locally and internationally to Jordan and seeks to support the growth, sustainability and adaptability of the country's inbound tourism sector. NTA members can receive a \$50 discount off membership with JITOA. For more information, contact Omar Hazineh, omar@jitoa.org, and mention that you're an NTA member.

Leading and learning go hand in hand at NTA

You've probably heard the quote "Leaders are learners" before. At NTA, we agree.

That's why we provide members with the latest industry knowledge and information in a variety of ways from a variety of presenters. Whether it's seminars that you can experience live at Travel Exchange, or webinars that you can experience from your own desk, NTA provides you with the information you need to stay on top.

Here is the feedback we've heard from some of our recent educational offerings:

"Engaging, relevant and current information."

"Candid content and real-experience examples."

"Practical and useful."

And if you want to take your industry knowledge to an even higher level, NTA's Certified Tour Professional program is exactly what you're looking for. You'll learn more about the industry through curriculum that was developed

by and for packaged travel professionals. Earning the CTP designation shows your peers that you're an experienced, knowledgeable and motivated professional who cares about the travel industry and the colleagues with whom you work.

"[The CTP program] has definitely been the most informative and beneficial course

I have ever taken," says Christina Werner of longtime NTA-member Custom Holidays.

Leaders are learners. And NTA gives you every tool you need to keep learning, and keep leading.

For more information on the CTP program and NTA education, go to ntaonline.com/education. ☎



The most recent class of CTP graduates was recognized at Travel Exchange '18.

A RIDDLE

You're in a room with scads of people.

They're all talking about tours and packaged travel—so many types, so many places.

One of them invites you to sit down at a table and talk business.

What color is the tablecloth?

Turn to page 38 for the answer.

Combine and conquer— and multiply your marketing success

BY CATHERINE HEEG



DO YOU FIND that your groups aren't filling as quickly as they used to? Are you interested in adding younger clientele to your groups?

What if you could combine your battle-worn sales and marketing strategies with some extra (social!) pizzazz? Trying new tactics can be tricky at first, so let's explore some ways to gradually add social into your traditional marketing tool box.

Let's get social

When you attend Travel Exchange or Contact as a buyer, you meet with suppliers and DMOs and connect on the trade show floor. It's awesome to shake hands and put faces to names, and it's an invaluable way to do business. Adding a social component extends your success from the trade show floor to your office.

- Connect socially with people that you meet by reaching out to them later on each of the social sites that you frequent.
- Sending an invitation and short note is easy to do as you're waiting for your flight connections at the airport.
- To follow up with a personal video, check out Loom to send your videos via email or a social post. (useloom.com)

Expand your marketing

We have a plethora of traditional marketing tools: brochures, flyers, consumer travel shows, in-house marketing events, in-person sales calls and email marketing. These initiatives can be reinvented with the addition of social marketing options.

Expanding your social reach to gain traction with a wider audience is where social marketing shines. In the marketing phase of group tour planning, a savvy social marketer will incent potential clients to provide their contact information by giving away some type of lead magnet.

Combine traditional and social marketing



- This can be a downloadable freebie, e.g., a packing guide, destination guide, etc., or a small marketing item (luggage tag, document wallet or other tchotchke). This will not only grow your email list, but it will also give you an opportunity to create a social ad audience of warm leads.
- Find more lead magnet tips here: bit.ly/2OY7sJW
- Once these prospects have opted in to receive your lead magnet, you can add them to a custom ad audience and target future social ads to them. Here's how: bit.ly/2nxjeyN

Now that you have reached out and landed a list of prospective clients, you can deploy additional social strategies to market a tour:

- Create an ad sequence that started with giving away your lead magnet and continues by drawing people further into your marketing and sales funnel.
- Remember to create Stories on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. On a mobile device, stories appear differently than a regular feed.
- Create Moments on Twitter to serve as a roundup of your tweets about the destination.
- Build Playlists on YouTube for each new tour you offer or destination you serve. You can share or embed your entire Playlist to give your viewers a complete lineup of relevant content.



- Write blog posts highlighting the destinations you'll visit. This is more of an opportunity to inspire and enlighten than it is to sell. Remember to share your blogs socially.
- Create a podcast series extolling the features and benefits both of the destination and of traveling as part of your group.
- Expand your reach by joining online groups that are related to your destination or theme. For example, if you're doing a history tour of the American West, check out Facebook groups such as Old West History Forum and Old West Mining Days and History. After joining relevant Facebook groups, start conversations before you begin marketing to the group.

Amplifying your marketing efforts by adding a social component will help you reach new people where they hang out socially, while providing information and edutainment. Embrace these key tactics to optimize your marketing efforts.

You can fill your group tours faster—and with the right people easier—when you combine old school and new school marketing opportunities. 📍

Catherine Heeg, an international speaker and trainer, focuses on social media marketing strategies for the tourism and hospitality industry. Connect with her socially and at cmsspeaking.com.

Journey of Faith

Candlelight procession in the Shrine of Fatima -Portugal

Every night, from Easter to the Advent and every Saturday throughout the year

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Fatima is one of the main World Shrines.
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inner peace and world peace.

Cofinanciado por:



Tour groups: Some assembly required

BY BOB ROUSE

THOUSANDS of travel professionals—representing destinations, hotels, attractions, sightseeing companies, etc.—work with NTA tour operators and their groups. But what goes into assembling a group and putting them on the road to explore new places and ideas?

We asked representatives of three NTA tour operators how they do it. Their companies use different business models, but each operator strives to create unique and memorable tours that meet the traveling goals of their customers.



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Courier: How do you assemble groups: Do you start with an idea to get a group, or do you start with a group and get an idea?

Diane: I typically create an idea. I look at a potential destination and see what kind of treasures we need to find to make a tour exciting. We look for WOW factors. We usually theme the tour, e.g., Made in America (factory tours); American Pride; Tour of Biblical Proportion; Baubles, Bows, Boutiques and Blue Suede Shoes; Christmas Stars in Nashville, etc. I am a wholesaler of over 100 different and unique tours that I create, and we run more than 800 customized tours a year.

Tom: Groups aren't typically initiated or created by Tauck. Rather, groups that are already formed (or are in the process of being formed) will come to us, either through a travel advisor or directly. Those

types of groups include family, alumni, affinity, culinary and incentive. Depending on the group size and whether they're traveling on a land tour or cruise itinerary, the group may travel on the same departure as other Tauck guests, or, if large enough, they may reserve an entire departure exclusively for their group.

Cathy: We work primarily with preformed groups. Most are groups of people, organizations or clubs that we already have a relationship with. Generally we focus on sharing with them the destinations that are new or current and hot. We often know their typical group size, and we understand what appeals to their frequent travelers. We show them an itinerary and, based on what we know about the clients, it includes adjustments to the class of hotels and the number of meals and attractions.

Courier: What about different sizes of groups? What changes when you take six or 60 people?

Cathy: Small groups are much easier to handle. You can use different transportation sizes, and you have so many more options for small groups. For example, you can allow them to order off a limited menu in restaurants. We're finding that small-group travel is a very popular option for people who are experienced travelers.

With large groups, you are challenged by the number of airline seats available, if flying together is a requirement. Also, we like included-food options to be a special event, and it can be a challenge to find food venues that give the group the attention they deserve. On the other hand, we do have special food events that are only practical to use if you have a large group.

Tom: We really don't do customized tours or cruises, so when groups travel with Tauck, they're experiencing one of existing itineraries. For us to host a group of 40 isn't really any different than hosting a group of 10. And by traveling on one of our existing trips, the group enjoys the benefit of all the planning, choreography and refinements we've already invested in that itinerary.

Diane: I do not run tours for less than 20 people, and a large group can fill upwards of 10 to 15 coaches. It does take some juggling when you're dealing with smaller attractions or limited space. As an example, if there is a tram that only holds 35 people, then you have to allow enough time for the group to do two different things: You need to find something for half of the group to do while the other half takes the tram tour, and then you flip them. It takes more coordination, but we make it work.

Courier: How do you find the balance for customizing an itinerary, in terms of time spent planning vs. margin per guest?

Diane: We customize every tour we do, with groups coming from all across the United States to go on our tours. It is time consuming, but I don't want to be a cookie-cutter tour company. I want groups to be able to have something different. It might be stops along the way or overnight locations. It could be a special dinner or private entertainment, and it flows with the tour theme. Also, we need to be aware of mileage and have groups that are coming from shorter distances do something different than those coming from longer distances. No one likes bus butt!

Cathy: We only do custom itineraries. It's time consuming, but it gives the group leaders an exclusive trip that cannot be cost-compared to a similar tour. And yes, they are a bit more expensive, but in the end the difference is that you are giving your customers a trip that is tailored to them and that brings them home with real bragging rights. We can give customers experiences they could not create for themselves, and the relationships they build and the ease of group travel is a real selling point.

Courier: How has your business changed over the years?

Tom: We've seen more large family reunion groups, likely as a result of families now being more scattered geographically. With family get-togethers already requiring vacation time and airplane flights, it makes

sense to make the gathering into a real occasion and have it in a fun destination.

Getting consensus among family members (or any other group) can be difficult, but with Tauck, only two decisions need to be made: Which itinerary should the group take ... and which departure date should they travel on? Everything else is handled by Tauck: organizing the itinerary, planning the sightseeing, and choosing hotels and restaurants. And because everyone pays their own share of the cost before the trip, there's no mounting tension about financial arrangements and "who's-paid-what-so-far" concerns over the course of the trip.

Cathy: No longer are group leaders expecting to fill a 56-passenger bus. Often the first thing that a prospective traveler asks about is how many people will be in the group. They understand it takes a lot more time getting 50 people off a bus versus 20. They know how hard it is to serve 50 people a great meal. They also know that the more guests you have, the higher

chance of problems, which can slow the pace of a trip. Group sizes have gone down and the price of tours has gone up, but believe me: People are willing to pay for small-group experiences.

Another trend is the age of groups. Boomers are here, and they are definitely traveling. But they're not the typical group traveler of yesterday. They want exciting activities, great food and nice hotel properties. They want early admissions and private tours. And they want new destinations, or traditional destinations that offer exciting new activities. The key thing is they are willing to pay for it. Once they try a small-group tour, they are hooked.

Diane: We have changed a lot since 1992. Gone are the days of visiting museums and being behind a red rope. Travelers want the museum to *come alive*. They want re-enactors, they want to meet with a survivor at a shipwreck museum, and they want to see the picture on the wall brought back alive.

And people want bragging rights. Show

them the world's smallest or largest. Let them meet the makers and talk with the bakers and candlestick makers. Create VIP experiences, such as having an event open early just for tour. This works for major shopping events, theaters, etc. All of us who create tours must take into consideration that interests have changed, and we need to forget what used to work. Bring the tour to life! 🍀

Trends in tour packages

NTA surveys its tour operator members each year and asks, among other things, about the percentage of business that companies derive from three types of packaged tours. From 2010 to 2017 ...

Scheduled tours remained about the same, increasing from 40% of overall business in 2010 to 41.7% in 2017.

Customized tours decreased from 51% to 44.4%.

But **FIT**, which could be considered a type of customized tour, increased from 9% to nearly 14%.



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Havana

Survey says: Cuba travel on the uptick

BY BOB ROUSE

TRAVEL FROM THE UNITED STATES to Cuba is expected to increase in 2019, according to a survey conducted by the Center for Responsible Travel, or CREST, a nonprofit research organization.

In the survey of U.S. tour operators and other service providers to Cuba, the majority of respondents expect travel bookings to Cuba to increase in 2019, despite continuing public misperceptions that Trump administration policies make travel to the island illegal.

What NTA operators should know

Academic Travel Abroad President Kate Simpson offers the following four bits of advice for NTA members who are considering adding a Cuba program.

- You should seek legal counsel to ensure you navigate the intricacies of both U.S. and Cuban laws and regulations.
- Be prepared for some nail-biting, as Cuba takes time to finalize arrangements and prices. Normal planning timelines do not apply, so be prepared to estimate and take some leaps of faith! Cuba always comes through in the end with fantastic experiences, though.
- Set expectations carefully: 4- or 5-star ratings in Cuba are a full level lower than international standards, and the quality of the food is mediocre in most places. *Paladares* (family-run restaurants) offer better fare, but nothing truly gourmet.
- Service, however, is generally wonderful! The Cubans are naturally warm and welcoming and willing to make guests happy.

Responses to specific types of travel include the following:

- Of those involved in U.S. people-to-people travel to Cuba, 55 percent said they expect their bookings to Cuba to increase in 2019, 23 percent expect a decrease and the remainder expect numbers to stay the same.
- Of the respondents involved in U.S. study abroad travel to Cuba, 60 percent expect their bookings to increase, and 20 percent expect a decrease.
- Of the respondents involved in cruise bookings to Cuba, 71 percent expect their bookings to increase, and only one respondent expects a decrease in 2019.

“Cuba is one of the safest countries in the world to visit, and we are pleased

that U.S. tour operators have indicated that American travel to Cuba, and especially people-to-people travel, is expected to rise in 2019,” said Martha Honey, executive director of CREST. “People-to-people trips to Cuba offer fully immersive and authentic educational experiences, and best of all, the island is reachable within a few hours from the East Coast.”

The findings come in the run-up to the November celebration of Havana’s 500th anniversary, and the destination is preparing for the expansion of its cultural programming and infrastructure, breathing new life to the capital city.

In 2018, a total of 638,360 U.S. travelers visited Cuba, up 2.8 percent from

Continued on page 37

A group from CREST visits Viñales, Cuba.



TOP: CC FLICKR/PEDRO SZEKEY; BIT.ly/2U6R8B

CENTER FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

COMPILED BY PAT HENDERSON

This much fun should be il-eagle

Naturalist at Minnesota's National Eagle Center



NATIONALEAGLECENTER.ORG

Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2019, Minnesota's National Eagle Center is dedicated to educating the public about the history, biology and ecology of the creatures. The attraction is in the Mississippi River town of Wabasha, just 40 miles northwest of Rochester.

The center, which is home to non-releasable bald and golden eagles, offers an array of guest experiences. Travelers can take part in interpreter-led live eagle programs that puts them within feet of the majestic raptors.

Classroom programs explore more specific topics such as the life cycle of eagles, their hunting and mating rituals, and the recovery and rehabilitation process. While these sessions take place regularly, travel planners can schedule programs at alternative times for larger groups.

The center has two floors with galleries and exhibits that test visitor knowledge about eagles. One popular area is an oversized replica of a bald eagle nest. Guests can see wildlife art in the Watershed Gallery, which includes special exhibits of paintings, watercolors and/or photographs from top wildlife artists.

Groups also should time a visit during the migration season, when hundreds of additional eagles fly through the Wabasha area. The center offers the SOAR with the Eagles festival each weekend in March, which includes outdoor viewing stations, flying bird shows, live animals and more.

For more information, call +1.651.565.4989 or go to national.eaglecenter.org.

Following in the Florida footsteps of De Soto

De Soto National Memorial marks the area on Florida's western coast where Hernando De Soto landed in 1539. The National Park Service-managed site, located just west of Bradenton, details the Spanish conquistador and his party, who were the first Europeans to extensively explore the southern U.S.

During a visit to the memorial, travelers can see displays of armor and weaponry dating back to the 16th century and other related historical items. The visitor center also shows the short film "Hernando De Soto in America," which details the trials and adventures of the Spaniards as they explored the region.

The park's main nature trail winds along the shoreline into multiple Florida ecosystems, as well as through a mangrove forest similar to what De Soto's party saw more than 500 years ago. Whether they hike it as part of a ranger-led tour or on their own, visitors can learn more about the historical and natural significance of the area.

The park also offers a number of special events and seasonal programs throughout the year, ranging from living-history demonstrations and re-enactments to boat tours and night-sky-viewing parties. The Camp Uzita site has programs from December through April that focus on daily life for both the Spanish explorers and the native tribes living in the area.

A popular option for students is the De Soto Ranchero Fishing Clinics. These free sessions, offered limited dates from October to March, allow participants to try their hand at fishing.

For more information, call +1.941.792.0458 (ext. 105) or go to nps.gov/deso.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Junior ranger program at De Soto National Memorial

Footsteps of faith

BY KAY SAFFARI

Catholics' devotion to religious journeys makes a spiritual impact.

St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

FAITH TRAVEL offers different paths for believers to explore their religion in a new way, whether through solo travel to a place of meditation or group travel to places of religious significance, led by a faith leader. Although people of all religions and denominations have an interest in faith travel, the devotion by Catholics to visiting shrines, participating in pilgrimages and visiting holy sites wherever they go puts them in a faith-travel category all their own.

According to the Rev. Paul Prabell of Christ the King Cathedral in Lexington, Kentucky, faith travel for Catholics meets several needs. "Travel to sacred places allows us to open ourselves to spiritual experiences," explains Prabell. "Some may travel to a location where Jesus once walked to be touched by God's grace, and others may be hoping for a cure or a miracle."

Although the Catholic Church does not require participation in pilgrimages or shrine visits, faith travel has a great impact on those who do take religious journeys. "Even those who take a trip as a tourist often return as a pilgrim. The act of being in a foreign land, perhaps not understanding the language, often leaves travelers more open to a spiritual experience," says Prabell.

The earliest pilgrimages

The concept of the pilgrimage began after the death of Christ, when many Christians wanted to follow the footsteps of Jesus. Pilgrimages became a tradition in the fourth century, with the earliest ones developing around the Holy Land.

Of course, this destination continues to be popular today for many Christians of all denominations. Israel Experts offers Catholic pilgrimages that include tours to many places of significance in the life of Jesus. Says Director of Sales

Dan Benjosef, "Our tours include visits to Nazareth, the boyhood home of Jesus; the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus lived and preached; and Jerusalem, the site of the Last Supper." The company offers a variety of itineraries, and it can also customize tours to meet your group's needs.

The pilgrimage process

For Catholics, participating in a religious pilgrimage is not just about the destination, but the actual process of walking along a route and the prayerful meditation that allows you to honor God. Participants are encouraged to view a pilgrimage not as a vacation, but as an opportunity to contemplate one's faith, the life of Jesus and the historic figures involved with the site they are visiting.

A popular walking pilgrimage route is El Camino de Santiago in Spain. This religious journey began in the 9th century when Christians began traveling to the Galician city of Santiago to visit

the chapel containing the remains of Santiago, or Saint James, one of the 12 apostles. The chapel is now part of the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral.

Today, more than 330,000 people from all over the world walk a network of trails across Spain, France and Portugal that comprise El Camino—some for religious purposes and others simply for the challenge. Says Ignacio Grijalvo of Across Spain, “We offer six different El Camino tour packages, each including a journey of a different length and with a different starting point.”

One tour of special interest includes stays each night in a different *parador*—a government-run luxury hotel located in a historic building, such as a castle or a monastery. “The *parador* makes a pilgrimage in Spain truly unique,” says Grijalvo. “You’ll experience the culture and history of Spain while enjoying the spiritual experience of the pilgrimage.” After the long journey to Santiago de Compostela, it is surely a lovely reward to sit quietly in the cathedral to meditate and pray.

Italy offers its own option, according to Aldo Caronia of Michelangelo International Travel, “As for a walking pilgrimage, we have the longest one in the world—the *Via Francigena* (the road from France). It’s the ancient pilgrim route that people have walked from medieval times to today in order to visit the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul at Vatican City.” The route actually starts at the cathedral in Canterbury, England, and passes through England, France, Switzerland and Italy before travelers embark by boat to the Holy Land.

Visiting shrines

Another type of religious travel for Catholics involves visiting shrines, defined as holy places associated with saints, martyrs or Jesus. Shrines can be located inside the parish, next to it or separated from it, and the shrine may identify where the holy person is buried, lived or died. Shrines also identify Marian apparition sites.

Catholic travel to shrines is popular for those seeking a spiritual experience or because they believe that the visit can result in miraculous healings, answered prayers or blessings. At some locations, those who have been healed leave behind crutches, notes or rosaries as evidence

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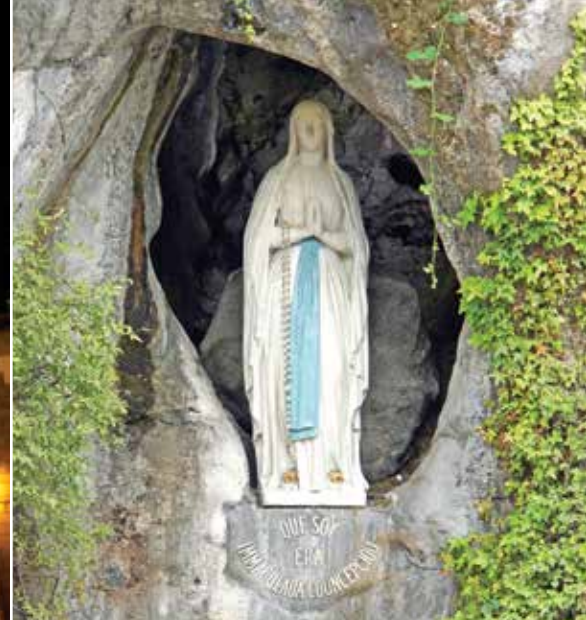
The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain

of their healing. In addition, visitors to shrines often leave flowers, photos, candles, notes and money as a way to give thanks and decorate the shrine.

One shrine famed for its healing powers is the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France. Built near the site where the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, this

church offers pilgrims the opportunity to experience the healing power of the local water. Says Father Prabell, “Every year thousands of believers travel to the shrine at Lourdes to bathe in the special healing waters there. Many go hoping for one answer but are surprised to receive a different miracle than what they expected.”

Likewise, the Sanctuary of Our Lady



The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes in France

of Fátima commemorates the appearance of the Virgin Mary to three young shepherds near Fátima, Portugal, in 1917. Now the fourth-most visited pilgrimage site in the world, Fátima attracts thousands of Catholic pilgrims each year, many of whom are seeking a place of faith and inner peace.

Says Alexandre Marto, vice president of ACISO—Associação Empresarial Ourém-Fátima, “Our region offers so much for the Catholic faith traveler, including mass at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima and visiting the homes and graves of the three shepherds. The highlight for many is participating in the nighttime candlelight procession.”

Across the Atlantic is the popular shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, located just outside Mexico City. The church was built near the site where the Virgin Mary appeared to an Aztec man, Juan Diego, in 1531 and asked that a church be built at that location. Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit this shrine, considered the most important religious site in Mexico.

Says Raynald Paquet of Grupo Meca Mexico, “We offer a great variety of faith tours that include visits to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and we can customize a tour with an itinerary of any length.” With more than 35 years of experience, Paquet promises to provide an unforgettable faith experience.

‘Every town has a story to tell’

Some Catholics prefer to plan a trip to a particular location and, while there, take advantage of nearby sites of religious

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Calvário Húngaro in Fátima, Portugal



Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City

importance. For example, Peter Craddick of Globetrotter Travel & Tours offers a 10-day tour of France that includes visits to several important Catholic sites.

Says Craddick, “I describe this program as an immersion for Catholics into the main places of interest in France coupled with important faith locations in Lisieux, Nevers and Lourdes—a trip that

allows travelers to strengthen one’s faith while seeing the popular sights.”

Groups go to the Palace of Versailles as well as famous landmarks in Paris, such as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame. Although customers will visit many destinations found on a typical sightseeing trip, they will also enjoy others that allow connections to the Catholic faith.

An enduringly popular travel destination for Catholic faith travel is Italy, and for good reason: The leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, lives in Vatican City.

“The Vatican is one of the most popular destinations for our Catholic groups,” says Caronia. “Visitors can attend special masses with the Pope, attend the Papal Audience with the Pope on Wednesdays or



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Italy's Via Francigena trail

take part in major Catholic celebrations." Caronia can arrange visits to Vatican City, the Vatican Museums and the Vatican grottoes where several popes are buried.

According to Ruggero Scoma of Rome-based RS Travel Development, Italy is an inspiring destination for Catholics because "every city and town has a story to tell in relation to the Catholic faith. Walk the same cobblestone streets that

the saints once traveled, and experience churches and cathedrals that have stood for centuries. Enjoy one of our Shrines of Italy tours to visit a variety of cities and their Catholic shrines, attend mass, and enjoy the art, architecture and outstanding food along the way."

With so many options around the world, Catholic faith travelers can find inspiration wherever they go. 📍

For more information ...

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UK churches offer varied, unique experiences

With thousands of historical churches and worship sites spread across the United Kingdom, even the most seasoned tour operator needs help finding the right churches and crafting the ideal experiences for clients.

Enter NCT Heritage Services. The organization's website, **explorechurches.org**, not only helps operators locate churches, events and festivals, but it plugs planners into unique, memorable experiences.

"We identify ways for tour operators to add value to their itineraries, and we make them easily accessible, searchable and bookable on our website," says Emma Clarke, project manager of NCT Heritage Services. "And operators will get contact information to use on the day they visit the churches."

Staff members at sites listed on **explorechurches.org** are trained on best practices for welcoming international guests, and each church must verify that it can safely accommodate groups of visitors.

And while the website is worth visiting—as are the many churches it lists—it's also worth visiting *often*.

"We are constantly adding more experiences as they are developed, and that includes a new section that details exclusive experiences throughout England and, soon, in Wales, Ireland and Scotland," Clarke says.

As an example of some of the new experiences available to operators and their groups, Clarke cites "Gloucester: A Tale of Two Potters," a tour that includes the site where Beatrix Potter was inspired to write "The Tailor of Gloucester" and the cathedral's cloisters, where three Harry Potter films were shot.

"We have themes ranging from history and architecture to popular movies, and these churches each offer something special: hands-on experiences, pilgrimages or unusual tours."

To learn more, visit **explorechurches.org** or email Clarke at explorechurches@nationalchurchestrust.org.



ASHLEY TAYLOR

Local legend holds that Collegiate Church of Holy Trinity in Tattershall is the burial place of Tom, a local man who was reputedly just over 18 inches tall when he died in 1620 at the age of 101. The church is one of 3,000 detailed on **explorechurches.org**.

Local flavor

Destinations dish out recipes
with a taste for their place.

— COMPILED BY KENDALL FLETCHER —



A group at C'est Bon Cooking in Ottawa prepares its own Canadian cuisine.

Sampling a region's distinctive cuisine can be the highlight of any itinerary, and hungry groups descend on restaurants, breweries, coffee houses, juiceries and food-focused festivals to experience the unique flavor of a destination. It's those meal memories that will linger long after the plates have been cleared and the glasses cleaned.

VANESSA DEWISON

Culinary delights can define a destination, whether patrons crunch the creative, uncork the unexpected—or enjoy exactly what they were hoping to find.

And that's what you'll discover here—the innovative, the unexpected and the anticipated. Several NTA members shared recipes for notable, local favorites: foods that are important to regional identities ... and visitors' memories.

New Orleans barbequed shrimp

New Orleans & Company | New Orleans | NTA contact: Thu Tran | ttran@neworleanscvb.com

Don't break out your grill for this dish. Here in New Orleans, barbequed shrimp means sautéed shrimp in Worcestershire-spiked butter sauce. We serve these shrimp with heads and tails on, so you need to dig in to enjoy. We highly recommend a bib.

We are famous for our barbequed shrimp, and with reason. The biggest trick to making this taste like ours is to not hold back on the butter. The three sticks called for are enough to scare you into cholesterol shock but are key to the flavor and consistency of the sauce. Another tip to keep in mind: To emulsify the sauce, be sure to add a little butter at a time while stirring rapidly. Don't overcook the shrimp or they'll become tough and hard to peel.



INGREDIENTS

16 jumbo shrimp (12 per pound, about 1½ pounds),
with heads and unpeeled
½ cup Worcestershire sauce
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice (about 2 lemons)
2 teaspoons ground black pepper
2 teaspoons cracked black pepper
2 teaspoons Creole seasoning
1 teaspoon minced garlic
1½ cups (3 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cubed
French bread as accompaniment

DIRECTIONS

In a large skillet, combine shrimp, Worcestershire, lemon juice, black peppers, Creole seasoning and garlic, and cook over moderately high heat until shrimp turn pink, about 1 minute on each side. Reduce heat to moderate and stir in butter, a few cubes at a time, stirring constantly and adding more only when butter is melted. Remove skillet from heat. Place shrimp in a bowl and pour sauce over top. Serve with French bread for dipping. Yields four appetizers or two entrées.

Courtesy of Mr. B's Bistro

Bacon-wrapped chorizo-stuffed dates

Campbell County CVB | Gillette, Wyoming | NTA contact: Terry Sjolín | terry@visitgillettewright.com

The recipe was created by a Gillette family while on a camping trip. They brought along the ingredients for other purposes, but decided to try combining them. They quickly realized that they might be onto something. After their camping trip, they made a batch and took them to the Prime Rib Restaurant. The owner, Ken Barkey, tried and loved them as well. He tested them while catering events, and they were a huge hit. They became a permanent item on his menu and are one of the most popular appetizers today.

INGREDIENTS

Whole dates opened on one side length-wise, pitted and the meat taken out
Ground chorizo sausage
Thinly sliced bacon

DIRECTIONS

Stuff the dates with chorizo. Use half a strip of bacon to wrap around the date and secure with a toothpick. (It's OK to soak the pick in water to slow the burning.) Bake at 500 degrees until bacon is medium crisped or to desired crispness. Serve hot as a sweet and medium spicy appetizer with a smoky taste from the bacon.



Arctic char pastrami glazed with maple syrup and beer

Ottawa Tourism | Ottawa, Ontario | NTA contact: Kelly Dean | kdean@ottawatourism.ca

Ottawa's C'est Bon Cooking specializes in Canadian Boreal cuisine—green alder, spruce tips, Labrador Tea, haskaps, maple and birch products; Ingredients most people are not familiar with, but are typical of our area.

Most ingredients in this recipe are foraged, harvested or cultivated locally. The Arctic char sourced from Iqaluit, or north of James Bay, is definitely a Canadian must-have and is not commonly known or used.

INGREDIENTS

2 filets Arctic Char, skin on (thick cut)

For curing the char:

½ cup kosher salt

½ cup maple sugar

For the pastrami glaze:

2-3 tablespoons Sunflower oil

5 medium-sized shallots, finely chopped

½ tablespoon crushed green alder* or black peppercorns

2 tablespoons fresh dill, finely chopped

2 cans oatmeal stout beer

¼ cup maple syrup (preferably dark)

3 bay leaves

½ tablespoon paprika

DIRECTIONS

Properly clean the char, removing any visible bones, pat dry with a paper towel to remove any excess liquid and place on a sheet pan, skin down. Combine salt and maple sugar, and heavily coat flesh side of the char with the mixture. Reserve any unused cure for a future use. Wrap the char in plastic wrap, lay a second sheet pan on top of the char and place a canned good on top of that sheet pan to weigh down the pan. Refrigerate for at least 24 hours.

In a saucepan, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add the chopped shallots and sauté until they reach a golden color. Add the beer and bay leaves to the shallots and whisk to combine. Bring to a boil and then simmer until mixture reduces by half. Once the liquid mixture (glaze) is reduced to 1 cup of liquid, add the crushed green alder pepper, paprika and dill, whisk to incorporate and let cool. Note that this glaze can be made in advance and will keep in the refrigerator for up to two months.

The next day, rinse off the char and pat dry. Pour 3 tablespoons of the glaze into a clean bowl and brush it onto the char's flesh. Re-wrap the char, place in the refrigerator and repeat this process every two hours, at least five times. After five basting of the char, slice very thinly and serve with a mix of organic greens or on a dry cracker such as a baguette crisp.

*Green alder is the cone fruit of an alder tree that is harvested from our forests, dried and used as a substitute for pepper. It has a more floral note to it rather than a spicy bite. It's best to use a mortar and pestle to crush it.

Courtesy of Georges Laurier, chef and co-owner of Ottawa's C'est Bon Cooking



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Steamers

Visit Hagerstown | Hagerstown, Maryland | NTA contact: Audrey Vargason | audrey@visithagerstown.com

“Originally the dish was served to the public at Sam’s Busy Corner in Williamsport, Maryland. Sam Eckis returned from World War I and opened the restaurant at a former hotel. Soon after the business opened, he shared food with a hobo passing through town, who gave him a recipe for ‘spoon hamburger,’ which became known as the steamer.” —Joan Knode, *Herald Mail*, Nov. 12, 2014

If you ask for steamers while visiting Hagerstown and Washington County, Maryland, you’ll be very surprised to learn that what is served is not clams. Everywhere else this dish is called sloppy Joes, and here, our steamers are similar to sloppy Joes but different. What makes them unique to our area is that less is more; they have less stuff in them and a different texture. The secret to a great steamer is to soak the ground beef in water until it is as fine as possible. You can’t have a good steamer if there are clumps in the ground beef.

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds ground beef
1 medium onion
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon pepper
½ cup ketchup

DIRECTIONS

In pot, soak ground beef for approximately 15 minutes until completely fine with no clumps. In colander, drain beef as thoroughly as possible. Add garlic powder, salt, pepper and ketchup. Mix well and simmer until thick and all the water has cooked out. Serve on hamburger roll. Steamers are great with cheese, chopped onions and mustard.

Courtesy of bigdaddysrecipes.com



JOYCE WHITE

Dragon bowl (smoothie bowl)

Abingdon Virginia CVB | Abingdon, Virginia | NTA contact: Monica Hall | mhall@abingdon-va.gov



When you think of Appalachian foods, you might conjure up hearty but humble meals of greens, cornbread and salt pork—not dragon fruit. But over the last decade, chefs in southwest Virginia have been quietly redefining the region’s cuisine, focusing on fresh flavors, locally sourced ingredients and unique preparations.

The mountain town of Abingdon is known for its artsy vibe, quaint charm and its proximity to some of the most spectacular outdoor recreation in the state. The downtown historical district features a thriving culinary scene with more restaurants per capita than New York City.

This recipe is courtesy of White Birch Food & Juice in Abingdon. In addition to smoothies and juices on the menu, you’ll find pasture-raised eggs and meats, and local fruits and veggies from the Abingdon Farmers Market.

This bowl is packed with antioxidants and omegas for healthy brain function and is a great immune system boost.

INGREDIENTS

½ cup frozen pitaya (dragon fruit)
¼ cup pineapple
½ banana
1 teaspoon flax oil
2 ounces almond milk
2 ounces orange juice

DIRECTIONS

Mix in a blender until a thick smoothie forms. In a bowl, put ¼ cup home-made granola on the bottom, then fill with smoothie. To finish, top with blueberries, pineapple, coconut flakes, another ¼ cup granola and drizzle with honey. Enjoy!

Gilroy Garlic Festival calamari

Visit Gilroy | Gilroy, California | NTA contact: Jane Howard | director@visitgilroy.com

Though we don't recommend attempting the Pyro Chef-style "flame-up" in your home kitchen (see photo), you can cook up the original Gilroy Garlic Festival recipe for calamari from Gourmet Alley Head Chef Steve Janisch.

If you prefer to leave the cooking to us, come join us for the 41st annual Gilroy Garlic Festival on July 26–28, 2019. Learn more at visitgilroy.com/gilroy-garlic-festival.

INGREDIENTS

3 pounds calamari, cleaned and cut
½ cup olive oil
¼ cup white sherry
1 tablespoon crushed fresh garlic
½ lemon
1 teaspoon dry basil or 1 tablespoon fresh basil
1 teaspoon dry oregano or 1 tablespoon fresh oregano
¼ teaspoon dry crushed red pepper
Red sauce (see recipe below)

For the red sauce:

1 pound whole, peeled tomatoes, canned or fresh
1 tablespoon olive oil
½ green pepper, chopped
1 stalk celery, chopped
1 medium-sized yellow onion, chopped
3 cloves fresh garlic, minced

DIRECTIONS

In a large skillet, heat olive oil at high heat. Add sherry and sauté crushed garlic. Squeeze the juice of ½ lemon into the skillet. Add the lemon rind; sprinkle herbs over and add calamari. Sauté calamari about 4 minutes on high heat. Do not overcook.



To make the red sauce: Mash tomatoes with potato masher and set aside. In medium-sized saucepan, heat oil, add chopped ingredients, and sauté until onion is transparent. Add mashed tomatoes and simmer 30 minutes. Pour red sauce over calamari and heat 1 minute.

Makes 10 servings.

Springfield Horseshoe Sandwich

Springfield CVB | Springfield, Illinois | NTA contact: Terry Truman | terry.truman@springfield.il.us

The Springfield Horseshoe Sandwich was created at the Old Leland Hotel in 1928 by Joe Schweska and Steve Tomko. For years, the only recipe that existed was "a pinch of this and a little of that." It wasn't until a Christmas edition of the *State Journal Register* in 1939 that Chef Schweska finally revealed the secret.

The name "horseshoe" was derived from the shape of the cut of ham used in the original sandwich. The french fries represent the nails of the shoe, and the sizzle platter represents the hot anvil.



INGREDIENTS (THE SAUCE IS KEY):

2 egg yolks
½ cup beer
2 tablespoons butter
3 cups grated sharp Old English Cheddar or Colby Longhorn cheese
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
¼ teaspoon dry mustard
½ teaspoon salt
1 dash cayenne pepper

DIRECTIONS

Beat the egg yolks and beer together. Melt the butter and cheese over boiling water, stirring in one direction only with a wooden spoon. Add the seasonings. Stirring constantly, add the beer and egg mixture a little at a time. Keep the mixture piping hot as you stir, but don't let it bubble. Constant stirring and the very best cheese will yield a smooth, uncured mixture. Serves four.

The sandwich is made by laying two pieces of toast on a preheated platter, then placing the meat on the toast, covering the entire sandwich with the cheese sauce, and circling the platter with french fries. Add a dash of paprika for color and you have created a horseshoe. 🍴

Midwest U.S. COMPILED BY PAT HENDERSON

Omaha: Neighborhood by neighborhood

"From historical and urban chic to scrumptious and ultra-hip, there is something unique to see and do in every corner of the city," says Jessica Weishahn, tourism sales manager for Visit Omaha. "Omaha's entertaining neighborhoods offer group options that hold the key to unlocking our rich historical treasures."

Here are four Omaha neighborhoods she recommends for exploration:

Old Market Entertainment District This area of downtown, with its red brick warehouses, was once the epicenter of city activity in the 1880s. That rings true today, as this 20-square-block district is a draw based on its mix of unique shops, art galleries, pubs featuring live music and more than 30 distinctly Omaha restaurants.

The Blackstone District The birthplace of the Reuben sandwich, this historical neighborhood is home to local craft breweries, farm-to-fork restaurants and bars offering one-of-a-kind craft cocktails. Visitors can still order the original Reuben sandwich at Crescent Moon, a popular neighborhood spot.

Dundee Dining is the name of the game in Dundee, which delights with chef-based restaurants, serving locally sourced ingredients in artfully presented dishes. "Plus, you can cap off dinner with ice cream at eCreamery, an Oprah fav, and check out Dundee Dell's Scotch whisky collection—one of the nation's largest," says Weishahn.

South Omaha Groups can explore the many flavors of this area, which is home to ethnic cultures from across the globe. Polish, Czech, German and Mexican history can be experienced at dozens of family-owned restaurants and folk art and pottery shops that line the South Omaha streets.



Omaha's Dundee neighborhood

To learn more, reach out to Weishahn at jweishahn@visitomaha.com or go to visitomaha.com.



Sight & Sound Theatre's "Samson"

It's always show time in Branson

Located in the southwestern corner of Missouri, Branson welcomes millions of visitors each year who can enjoy the beauty of the Ozark Mountains and the dizzying array of world-class entertainment.

"The key factor to Branson's popularity with group visitors is the wide variety of live entertainment available throughout the year," says Lenni Neimeyer, director of group sales for the Branson/Lakes Area CVB. "Our stages showcase the '50s, '60s, '70s, pop, country, gospel, bluegrass, rock 'n' roll and patriotic music, plus comedy, magic, dance and Broadway-style productions full of special effects, dazzling costumes and so much more."

The following three NTA members in Branson have a lot to offer for travelers:

Dutton Family Theater Complex

NTA contact: Debbie LeTourneau
debbie.letourneau@gmail.com
theduttons.com

The regular Branson season starts for the Duttons in April and runs through the end of October, then the Ozark Mountain Christmas is staged through the end of the year. Groups have plenty of options to combine with seeing a show, including the theater's popular Youth to Youth Program for students, especially bands and choirs.

Presleys' Country Jubilee

NTA contact: Raeanne Presley
raeanne@presleys.com
presleys.com

Coming off a highly successful 50th anniversary year in 2017, Presleys' Country Jubilee continues to entertain audiences in its 1,500-seat theater. A personal welcome from a member of the Presley family is available for groups, as are special discounts for NTA tour operators and a post-show visit on the motorcoach by one of the performers.

Sight & Sound Theatres

NTA contact: Michael Pitman
mike.pitman@sight-sound.com
sight-sound.com

For 2019, this Branson theater is presenting two shows, "Samson," which will be staged through Oct. 12, and "Miracle of Christmas," which runs Nov. 2–Dec. 28 and celebrates the most retold Bible story. "A special touch for groups attending a show is an actor-led Behind the Scenes Tour," says Sight & Sound's Michael Pitman.

5 new options for groups visiting Kansas

From a glimpse of its Badlands to its lineage with a U.S. president, Kansas has a lot on the horizon in 2019. According to Kelli Hilliard of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism, different aspects of the state's history and culture can be discovered at the following five new or refreshed attractions:

The Eisenhower Presidential Museum This historical center in Abilene will debut its updated gallery spaces during the 75th anniversary D-Day Commemoration June 1–6. The week's activities will also include symposiums featuring guest speakers, a remembrance ceremony and a commemorative concert by the Salina Symphony.

Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park Groups can check out Kansas' Badlands at this park in the northwestern part of the state. Towering rock formations rise 100 feet above Little Jerusalem's mile-long valley and a grouping of Niobrara Chalk formations that have been off-limits to the public will be on view when the park opens in mid-2019.

The Midwest Dream Car Collection Set to be unveiled April 13 in a new space in downtown Manhattan, the MDCC features an eclectic mix of early roadsters, muscle cars and exotics from across the United States.

Wichita's Boats & Bikes Paddling enthusiasts can get out on the waters of the Arkansas River in downtown Wichita thanks to Boats & Bikes, which will offer kayak, canoe and paddleboat rentals near the city's new boathouse and public dock this spring.

The Boot Hill Museum The attraction in Dodge City broke ground on a new exhibit hall. The updated facility is expected to be ready to go in the first half of 2020.



DOUG STREIBEL/KANSAS TOURISM

Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park

To learn more, email Hilliard at kelli.hilliard@ks.gov or go to travelks.com.



TERRACEHILL.IOWA.GOV

Terrace Hill

A trio of Iowa treasures

The NTA membership includes destination marketing organizations in Dubuque, Waterloo and Des Moines. Each of those Iowa cities is home to a number of attractions, including the following three, which detail unique parts of the state's story:

National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium (Dubuque)

The Mississippi River has played a vital role in the development of Dubuque, which is Iowa's oldest city. Travelers can learn about river life as they explore the 10-acre campus that includes exhibits, animal encounter areas, aquariums and a historical dredge boat.

Grout Museum of History and Science (Waterloo)

The traditions of the Cedar Valley—its residents, landscape and history—is showcased through permanent and temporary exhibits at the Grout Museum. The attraction also is home to the only public planetarium in Northeast Iowa.

Terrace Hill (Des Moines)

This National Historic Landmark, which serves as the residence of the Iowa governor, is open for tours from March to December. During the guided walks, visitors learn about the circa-1869 mansion as they explore the first two floors and the gardens.

For more information on those destinations, contact the following NTA members:

- ▶ Whitney Sanger, Travel Dubuque | wsanger@traveldubuque.com
- ▶ Annette Freeseaman, Experience Waterloo | annette@experiencewaterloo.com
- ▶ Katie Stien, Des Moines CVB | katies@catchdesmoines.com 📍

West South Central U.S.

Libations in Little Rock

BY KENDALL FLETCHER

With 11 craft breweries, two wineries and a distillery operating in Little Rock, Arkansas, groups can find a drink to fit all—well—tastes.

“Whether you like a hefeweizen, an IPA, a pale ale, a stout, a porter, a Vienna lager, a doppelbock, trippel or even a quadruple ale, there’s a craft brewery in Little Rock with a brew just for you,” says Bill Fitzgerald, vice president of marketing and communications with the Little Rock CVB.

The bureau put together a Locally Labeled passport so visitors can sample them all. At each stop, they receive a stamp on their passport, and once they patronize every brewery, winery and distillery, they’ll receive an exclusive Locally Labeled t-shirt and sandstone coaster. They can also visit fewer and get less swag, but still have a great time, Fitzgerald says.

One of those stops is Vino’s Brewpub. It was converted from Vino’s Pizzeria into the city’s first brewpub in 1993 (not long after brewpubs were made legal) and is still considered one of the local favorites. Others include Lost Forty Brewing and Rock Town Distillery.

Fitzgerald says the growth of the craft beer scene is parallel to the rise of the city’s food scene, as local, organic



Lost Forty Brewing

products are always preferred on the table—and in the beer.

“Arkansas is an agricultural state, and we’ve always enjoyed high-quality local produce,” he says. “Best of all, you don’t have to be a big spender to enjoy truly gourmet meals and beers here. From neighborhood diners to white tablecloth fine dining establishments, local is a thing here. A *big* thing.”

For more information, contact Fitzgerald at bfitzgerald@littlerock.com or go to littlerock.com.

Conroe is alive with the sound of music

BY KENDALL FLETCHER

Conroe, Texas, is officially a hot spot for live music; they recently received the Music Friendly Communities designation from the Texas Music Office. It’s one of seven cities in the Lone Star State to earn this title, joining the likes of Fort Worth and San Antonio.



CONROE CVB

To experience some of Conroe’s live music scene, groups can visit The Corner Pub downtown, where open mic nights are hosted Monday through Thursday. The newest downtown venue, Pacific Yard House, hosts live performances every Friday and Saturday night. At the Red Brick Tavern, which is a restaurant housed in an historical building, visitors can hear live country music and indulge on wood-fired pizzas, tavern cheese fries and 12 different craft beers.

Southern Star Brewery and B-52 Brewery host tap parties and live music throughout each month. Both offer a feel for the outdoors with picnic tables, patios and a fire pit. Visitors can get to Papa’s on the Lake by car or boat; dance to live music on the weekends; play pool, volleyball and foosball; and take a dip in the swimming pool.

The Conroe Cajun Catfish Festival closes down the city streets and brings in Texas country music, zydeco music and lots of family-friendly fun each October. And, for a glimpse into the musical past, The Sounds of Texas Music Series highlights country classics from the ’80s and ’90s in an intimate concert setting at the historic Crighton Theatre.

For more information, contact Conroe CVB’s Shannon Overby at shannon@playinconroe.com or go to playinconroe.com.

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Five Oklahoma parks for adventure

BY PAT HENDERSON

With 11 different ecoregions and a landscape that ranges from grasslands and pine-laden forests to mesas and canyons, Oklahoma is a prime spot for outdoor enthusiasts.

According to Oklahoma State Parks' Media Coordinator Keli Clark, the parks offer a look at the diverse terrain, flora and fauna found in every corner. She recommends the following five state parks for groups and FITs:



Roman Nose State Park

LORI DUCKWORTH/OKLAHOMA TOURISM

1 Lake Murray State Park (Ardmore)

Oklahoma's first and largest state park offers a glimpse of the past and present. A driving tour reveals the distinctive craftsmanship of the cabins, bridges and park's other structures from the 1930s.

2 Sequoyah State Park (Hulbert)

Located near Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, this park is named for the creator of the Cherokee language. Breathtaking sunsets, which illuminate Lake Fort Gibson, are a guest favorite.

3 Beavers Bend State Park (Broken Bow)

The Mountain Fork River flows through the park, which is home to tall pines, cold-water fishing lakes, and hiking and horseback trails.

4 Roman Nose State Park (Watonga)

The park's west end features a natural-rock swimming pool and beautiful springs. The comfortable 20-room, hilltop lodge, surrounded by vast canyons, includes a restaurant.

5 Robbers Cave State Park (Wilburton)

Set in the San Bois Mountains, the park is known for its namesake caverns, a favorite of hikers and climbers. A new addition to the park is the off-road area for Jeeps and motorcycles.

To learn more, contact the Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department's Todd Stallbaumer at todd@travelok.com or go to travelok.com.



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Latin America

COMPILED BY KENDALL FLETCHER

Trending: Turtles in Tortuguero

While taking in the beautiful beachy views of both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, groups visiting Costa Rica can observe sea turtles nesting.

Five of the seven species of sea turtles in the world lay their eggs on Costa Rica's beaches, and according to itineraries proposed by Travel Excellence, a San Jose-based operator, two of the best sites to see this incredible spectacle of nature are Tortuguero National Park and Ostional Wildlife Refuge.

Tortuguero National Park Located on the northeastern Caribbean coast, Tortuguero Beach is one of the Western Hemisphere's important nesting sites for the endangered green turtle. The nesting season goes from July to September, and in two months, baby turtles emerge from the sand to make their way to the ocean. Tortuguero is often included as part of Travel Excellence's classic program. Packages include all meals and lodging, as well as bus and boat transfers, plus a private boat with amazing views of the canals. Groups can also take part in a cooking class to learn some Caribbean recipes.

Baby sea turtle on Tortuguero Beach

CC FLICKR/MAX GOLDBERG: bit.ly/2UtlAp



Ostional Wildlife Refuge Ostional's beach on the Pacific coast is the world's second-largest nesting ground for the olive ridley sea turtle. Depending on the season (mainly from July to December), innumerable olive-colored turtles arrive on the beach, and the mass arrival of turtles is called *arribadas* (arrivals). Groups visiting Ostional can stay about 25 minutes away in Nosara, a spectacular beach area including Guiones and Pelada beaches, and both are great for swimming, relaxing and watching breathtaking sunsets.

To learn more, contact Carlos Blanco with Travel Excellence at info@travelexcellence.com or go to travelexcellence.com.

Making memories with Grupo Meca Mexico



PAT HENDERSON

In business for more than 37 years, Grupo Meca offers guaranteed departures, fly-and-drive itineraries and tailor-made programs in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize.

"With Grupo Meca, people have the opportunity for some unique travel experiences with the authenticity and the particularity of colorful local communities and their traditions and history," says

Raynald Paquet, sales manager for North America.

The company offers several programs for groups to see Mexico with guaranteed operations in English for a minimum of two people, including Great Mexico, Discover Yucatan, Tierra Maya, From the High Plateaux to the Pacific and Colonial Charm. Groups can see sites across the country such as the Agua Azul waterfalls, the Kukulcán Temple, the Calakmul archaeological site and the basilica in Guanajuato.

"We are very meticulous in the choice of our hotels, which are generally in the center of the cities, and our restaurants propose a culinary experience with high standards. Grupo Meca is also one of the rare agencies in Mexico to have its own fleet of vehicles, and our guides have a university education in archaeology, history or art history," he says.

For more information, contact Paquet at northamerica@grupomeca.com or go to grupomeca.com.

A colorful closer look

The knowledgeable staff at A Closer Looks Tours has recently jazzed up its popular Colonial Cities Tour, adding even more unique experiences for groups who book with the Arizona-based operator.

"The itinerary has such strong contributions from the ancient and modern civilizations of Mexico. It offers a rich spectrum of views into the eras that have existed and played a part in creating such a captivating destination," says Operations Coordinator Rhianna Newhall. "The extra days we have added on to this trip have relaxed the pace of the tour to allow for more time in unique areas that people really love, such as Guanajuato, Taxco and Mexico City."

Groups can journey through these—as well as other—colonial cities and learn why Mexico is not only known for the strong folklore in its culture, but also for its citizens' hospitality.

"The beauty of the history and the soul of its people has helped Mexico reach its current spot as the sixth-most-visited country in the world. All of our passengers depart with an expectation and return with a great love of Mexico from the deep and colorful journeys we provide," Newhall says.

For more information, contact Newhall at rhianna@acloserlooktours.com or go to acloserlooktours.com.

San Miguel de Allende



A CLOSER LOOK TOURS



Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

One cruise, 10 Latin American ports BY BOB HOELSCHER

In January I escaped the Pacific Northwest's cold and snow by taking an 18-night Panama Canal cruise from New York to Los Angeles aboard Norwegian Cruise Line's *Norwegian Gem*.

Complementing a full transit of the Panama Canal, this sailing included 10 ports of call: two in the Netherlands Antilles (Curacao and Aruba); two more in Colombia; stops on the Pacific coasts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala; and three calls in Mexico.

One of the advantages of my cruise was that unlike some Caribbean ports, where half a dozen simultaneously visiting mega-liners can make sharing tourism facilities with 20,000 or more fellow travelers a somewhat less enjoyable experience, our ports were surprisingly uncrowded. We were the only ship there in six of them. In three of the others, only one additional ship (including a 148-guest sailing vessel) was there during our visit, and the one in Puerto Vallarta

included a smaller, 700-guest ship.

Considering the number of fascinating places we visited, the attraction of the Panama Canal itself, and Norwegian's unique tour operator program, NTA operators would be wise to take notice.

As a very frequent cruiser, I have found that traveling with NCL is always a pleasure, like coming home to spend time with family and friends. Their sailings have proven to offer one of the most consistent mass-market cruise products available, providing top value and "Freestyle" flexibility at attractive prices.

No matter which ship or itinerary is chosen, one can count on seeing interesting ports of call aboard a well-maintained and managed vessel boasting extensive guest facilities, an outstanding variety of shipboard entertainment and activities, fine food served in a wide range of dining venues, and excellent service from a smiling, friendly staff.


When this article publishes in late



Panama Canal

March, I will be on a 14-night eastbound Panama Canal departure on *Norwegian Star* from L.A. to Miami with a group of 62 guests that I will be escorting for one of my consulting clients. Moostash Joe Tours, a traditional, family-owned motorcoach tour operator and NTA member in Nebraska, was selling virtually no cruises when I began working with them a little over four years ago. I noted that the demographics of their tour customers made them prime candidates for seagoing vacations, and in fact many were probably already cruising, but buying their sailings elsewhere.

Happily, Joey Spellerberg, the company's young, but very bright, second-generation CEO "bought" my suggestion and today, by utilizing Norwegian's excellent tour operator program, he is able to attract very substantial (and very profitable) numbers on extended sailings like this one.

There is definitely something to be learned here for NTA operators who have yet to "take the plunge" into cruising! 

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Trott's Garden

South Pacific

COMPILED BY PAT HENDERSON

Hot to Trott's, etc.

"There is a new world of experiences Downunder," says Charmaine Edwards, principal manager of Great Tour Expectations. "New Zealand is the rest of the world all rolled into one, and Australia is a big country the land size of the U.S. Both countries are great for groups for sightseeing, adventure, education and music, plus even garden tours."

Edwards focuses her tours on two of her favorite places: her native New Zealand and Australia. One of her unique offerings highlights New Zealand's bountiful botanical gardens. As part of the tour, travelers can visit top attractions such as the South Island's Trott's Garden and the Larnach Castle and Gardens, both of which are designated as Gardens of International Significance.

"For me, I just love Trott's Garden in Ashburton," she says. "When I went to see the garden a few years back for the first time, I was shown around by Allen Trott who, with his family, purchased it in 1978 and started working on it in 1984. From the time you walk through the iron gates of the immaculate and magnificent garden, you can see the love and passion of this garden, which also includes a historical chapel."

Farther south on the South Island just outside Dunedin, Larnach Castle was derelict and the gardens overgrown before the Barker family purchased it in 1967 and began the restoration. Today, groups can tour the mansion and its colorful grounds, where rhododendrons, azaleas, Scottish Heathers and hundreds of other blooms appear, depending on the season.

Great Tour Expectations also includes other popular New Zealand and Australia stops throughout its itineraries, and has a specifically crafted line of tours for school groups.

To learn more, email Edwards at greattourexperiences@outlook.com or go to greattourexperiences.com.

Larnach Castle and Gardens



Authentic Australia: Like a good neighbor, Safir is there

While Safir Tours is only six years old, the primary players at the Australian tour company are no strangers to the tourism game.

“We have 65-plus years of combined industry experience on three different continents, and we take a very hands-on

approach,” says Safir CEO Nayaz Noor. “Our focus is on providing exemplary services to our clients worldwide through personalized attention to detail, and our passion is to promote this great destination.”

The company works with leisure groups coming to Australia and also offers destination management services for meetings and events planners. Noor, who says many are drawn to the country because of its unique heritage and traditions, offers the following examples of how Safir’s itineraries help travelers discover Australian culture:



“In Uluru one can learn the art of dot painting and what it means as a way of communication. While the dot style is beautiful to the eye, it has a deeper purpose—to camouflage the sacred meanings behind the stories in the paintings.”



“On a typical Top End tour, our guests go on an interpretive walk to see ancient rock art dating 20,000 years old; get a hands-on experience in fire lighting, spear throwing and Rarrk painting; and hear tales of ancient tribal life, languages and ceremonies.”



“In The West MacDonnell Ranges one can see the Ochre Pits and learn that the Aboriginals used it for medicinal purposes, as a magical charm and to paint weaponry to increase the success of hunting.”

To learn more, email Noor at nayaznoor@safirtours.com.au or go to safirtours.com.au.



Aboriginal painting class at Katherine Art Gallery

SAFIR TOURS

Singing out and giving back in Hawaii

Since it opened in 2002, EMI Hawaii has helped groups and FITs discover the beauty and culture of the Aloha State, one island at a time.

“We work directly with tour operators and travel agents bringing their groups to Hawaii,” says Mary Jo O’Neal, EMI’s director of sales and marketing. “We handle all the land arrangements so our travel partners don’t have to, and we pride ourselves on providing excellent customer service throughout the planning and execution of the tours for the groups traveling to our island paradise.”

The company offers a number of packages that blend sightseeing on one or more islands with local cultural experiences. Over the years, it has organized hundreds of student tours, including performance-based, science-themed and history-focused programs.


“We realize that our tour might be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for these students, many coming from across the U.S.,” adds O’Neal. “For a band or choir, performing at Pearl Harbor and other historical locations around the island introduces different cultural experiences than they have on the mainland.”

In addition to taking the stage, performance groups also can take part in university-level workshops, enjoy cultural exchanges with Hawaiian bands and choirs, march in local parades and learn to hula.

EMI also has developed a series of voluntourism offerings that allow travelers to add more meaning to their vacations.

One of the activities is the Adopt a Beach program, which allows the group to clean up marine debris in order to keep the beaches and oceans healthy, and another connects volunteers with at-risk youth through a surfing ministry.

“Hawaii Global Voluntourism was created to provide an opportunity for groups to make a difference in people’s lives and to give back to the community they are visiting,” O’Neal says.

To learn more, reach out to O’Neal at mjoneal@emihawaii.com or go to emihawaii.com. 

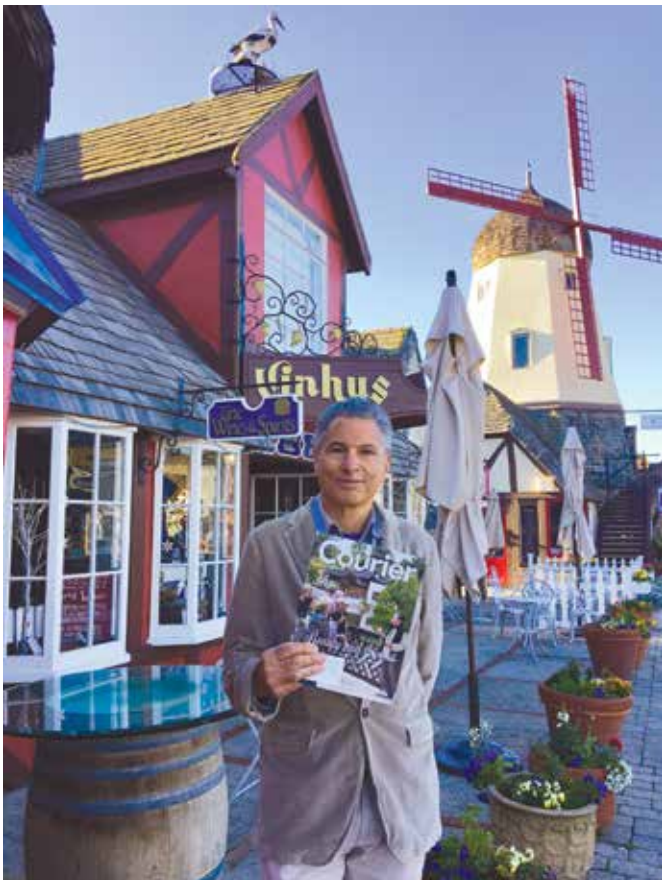


Choir group at Pearl Harbor

EMI HAWAII

COMMUNITY

NEWS AND UPDATES FROM THE NTA FAMILY



Where in the world is *Courier*? Clockwise from upper left:

Jara Haas of Major Marine Tours & Harbor 360 Hotel with one of her company's boats ... twice.

Kaitlyn Dunneback of Witte Travel with a familiar face on the cover of the January issue.

Marsha Wilson of Visit Durango in front of one of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad's trains.

Greg Corso of the Solvang CVB takes *Courier* on a tour of some of Solvang's famous windmills.

Meet the Members

Visit Albuquerque

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

NTA contact: Maureen Chavez, tourism and small group sales manager

Office phone: 800.284.2282

Website: visitabq.org

NTA member since: 1977

What's new and exciting in Albuquerque?

Our newest luxury hotel, Hotel Chaco, pays homage to Chaco Culture National Historical Park and the ancient Puebloans who still reside in New Mexico. Construction of a new \$7.5 million restaurant at the top of the Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway is nearly complete. The development team is aiming for a spring or summer opening for the new 13,000-square-foot business.

What is a must-see in your area?

Old Town Albuquerque, the historical heart of the city, is home to more than 150 merchants and provides an array of dining, shopping and entertainment options. Take a tour while in Old Town, which offers everything from history and culture walking tours and ghost tours to Breaking Bad RV tours.

What is Albuquerque best known for?

Due in part to its more than 310 days of

sunshine, unique weather patterns and geographical setting, Albuquerque is known as the hot air ballooning capital of the world. We are home to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, celebrating its 48th anniversary this year. We are also very well known for our traditional New Mexican cuisine (very different from Mexican cuisine due to the variety of cultural influences and our famous chile pepper) and a plethora of history, culture and art.

What's your favorite vacation spot?

I enjoy the lights, excitement and entertainment that Las Vegas has to offer; however, I am partial to New Mexico's oldest continuously inhabited community of Acoma "Sky City." The original community has no running water, no electricity and no cell service but provides the

best atmosphere for reconnecting with culture and tradition, and for really communicating with family and friends.

What do you like to do when you're not hard at work?

I enjoy spending time with my 5-year-old daughter. She reminds me that life is more than just emails, text messages and Facebook, and that I need to take a moment to imagine, dream and appreciate life's small details.

For more information, email Chavez at mchavez@visitabq.org.



Comfort Inn & Suites-Brattleboro

BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

NTA contact: Amy Manning, general manager

Office phone: +1.802.579.1344

Website: choicehotels.com/vermont/brattleboro/comfort-inn-hotels/vt073

NTA member since: 2018

Tell us what makes your hotel special.

We're a four-star hotel that has been described as modern and low-key, as well as clean and comfortable. Our parking lot can accommodate buses as well as trucks of all sizes. The hotel is fully handicap accessible and 100 percent smoke- and pet-free, which makes it very desirable for travelers. Our rooms are quiet and spacious.

What are some of the amenities you offer?

We have a lovely indoor heated pool and a sleek fitness center for all of our guests. We have a bright and fresh guest laundry area to accommodate our patrons with elongated

stays. We also have three polished and professional conference rooms.

What's your favorite destination?

As a past travel agent, I have been lucky enough to travel to a great many places. My favorite place of all time would be the Dominican Republic. Beautiful people, beautiful beaches—what more could you ask for?

What do you like to do in your spare time?

In my spare time, I am a woman of many things. I enjoy everything from sewing to making specialty cakes to hunting. I love spending as much time as I can with my two grandchildren.

You get to pick dinner tonight. Where are you going?

A favorite restaurant for me is La Queue de Cheval Steakhouse & Raw Bar in Montréal! After eating there, I dreamed about the meal for weeks.



For more information, email Manning at gm.vt073@choicehotels.com.

Cuba travel

Continued from page 14

2017. This increase was due in large part to U.S. cruise ship arrivals, which nearly doubled in 2018. U.S. air travel to the island decreased by 34 percent in 2018.

CREST survey respondents attributed a decline in travel to Cuba during the first half of 2018 to the U.S. State Department imposing a “Level 3: Reconsider Travel” advisory for Cuba in September 2017, which has since been changed. Along with the mistaken belief that U.S. travel to Cuba was illegal, operators also cited travelers’ fear of being subjected to unnecessary scrutiny by U.S. authorities as being responsible for the decline in 2018 travel.

U.S. policy changes in mid-2017 that impacted travel to Cuba included steep cuts in diplomatic personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Havana and bans on specific types of travel and business transactions. The majority of CREST survey respondents (62 percent) reported decreases

in U.S. travelers visiting Cuba of 20 percent or more during the first half of 2018.

Part of a legacy

NTA-member Academic Travel Abroad has been offering people-to-people trips around the world for decades, starting with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and China as early as 1979.

“Our Cuba trips are part of that legacy,” says Kate Simpson, president of the Washington, D.C.-based company. “There is a justified fascination with countries so different from our own. And Cuba is even more compelling, as it lies so near our shores and has maintained a vibrant artistic and musical tradition throughout its history.”

Through its study abroad division, CET Academic Programs, ATA has plans to establish a high school program in Havana and a college semester-long program in Santiago soon.



1950s U.S. cars are common in Cuba because a 1959 ban on imports was only recently relaxed.

“We hope that the exciting events and developments to come in 2019 elevate overall awareness of the destination, and that Americans are reassured that it is legal and safe to travel to this unique and compelling destination,” Simpson says. ☞

To contact Simpson, email her at ksimpson@academic-travel.com.

CREST is a nonprofit research organization dedicated to increasing the positive global impact of responsible tourism in Cuba and around the world. To learn more, go to responsibletravel.org.



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The following list shows organizations that joined NTA recently. Companies that also joined the Faith Travel Association have an FTA logo by their name. To access complete information on each of these new members, log on to NTAonline.com and go to the member searches.

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georgetownky.com

Visit Seattle

John Boesche
Seattle, WA 98101 USA
visitseattle.org

TOUR OPERATORS

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bluerivertravelusa.com

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Israel Experts
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Or Yehuda, 6021807 Israel
israexperts.com

Meridian Guided Travel
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meridianguidedtravel.com

Wherever Tours LLC
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wherevertours.com

Your Man Tours Inc. (dba YMT Vacations)
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ymtvacations.com

ZNY Travel Inc.
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cincymuseum.org

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nolahotels.com

Fairbridge Hotel & Conference Center
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firstcharterbus.com

Manna Inc./BF Companies
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NTA EVENTS

Save these dates in 2019 and beyond to connect with new partners and destinations. For more information on these events, click the EVENTS tab on NTAonline.com

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An invitation to savor

BY JENNA AUKERMAN

THREE STUDENTS, armed with half-eaten dripping ice creams, surrounded me on the bustling streets of New York's Chinatown. Breathless and bouncing, with an energy seemingly afforded to only touring high schoolers, these Midwest kids had never been someplace so strange, so massive and so intense.

Their eyes were brimming with delight as they stumbled over each other, racing to tell me what happened.

"Jenna Jenna Jenna! Sooooo we were kind of scared to explore Chinatown but we went down this small street and we saw this little tiny restaurant and we weren't sure if we should go in but you said we should try something we've never had so we did and the owner was so nice but we couldn't understand what she was saying but it didn't matter and she helped us order and



The author in action during a culinary tour

we think we had that thing called 'dim sum' and we don't really know what that is but it was all so delicious and then after that we found this ice cream place with all these weird flavors like green tea and it sounds so crazy but it's actually AMAZING!"

High school students, right? The best. They were beaming. I was beaming. As a tour operator, I couldn't have planned a better moment if I tried.

This, I thought to myself, is why I do this. Right here.

In that moment, my mind flashed to my own memories. I was on my first visit to Sichuan, China, and feeling quite out of place. Eight of us—all strangers to me—were gathered around a circular table, a massive, beautiful hot pot perfectly centered between us. I hardly recognized a single ingredient, and I certainly hadn't mastered enough Mandarin to ask. (OK, I hadn't mastered *any* Mandarin.)

Yet the locals weren't going to let my fears and language gaps hold me back. They began demonstrating, gesturing enthusiastically with kind smiles and affirming nods, inviting me to try everything.

Then I thought of the time I sat in a small trattoria in Italy, thinking as I dined that, while I had never heard the husky, rich laughter of the

chef's grandmother, I knew I was tasting that legacy of joy in the chef's bolognese.

And the time I was on a small family farm in the Philippines, where—on an afternoon far too hot, with hosts who had far too little—I was presented a simple, yet profound, dinner of roast chicken and rice. What a gift.

It was never just food. It was an opportunity to glimpse into generations of love and generosity ... of identity, traditions, childhoods and memories ... of creativity, passion and life.

When we travel, food is offering us not only a way to engage our senses, but also to let go of our barriers. Food is that unrelenting friend that welcomes us all to the table in spite of our differences. It invites us—again and again—to savor not just the meal, but everything.

So, as I watched the last of the students' green tea ice creams melt in their cones, seeing their wide-eyed exuberance, seeing their timidity turn into empowerment, seeing them embrace a place that was a new and scary mere hours ago, I knew: Through this incredible industry, I'm given the chance to witness, engage and cultivate just these kinds of moments.

This wasn't only their invitation, but mine as well. What a gift. ☺

Jenna Aukerman is tour director for Omanson Tour & Travel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You can reach her at jennaaukerman@gmail.com.



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