

Byline: Stephanie Powell

## Heritage Tourism

In a landscape of cookie cutter neighborhoods, big-box retailers and national restaurant chains, a growing number of American travelers are searching for unique attractions. Communities that preserve and advertise places and activities representing their history and culture are capitalizing on a niche tourism market.

Art galleries, theaters, museums and historic sites, as well as festivals, fairs, ethnic communities, unique buildings and archaeological sites are becoming big draws for cultural heritage tourists. "[Today's travelers are] looking for things that really capture their interests," says Amy Webb, heritage tourism director for the Washington-based National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP).

Lancaster County, Pa., first experimented with heritage tourism in 1994 as part of a state-run pilot program. Today it involves more than 100 historical and cultural attractions in 60 municipalities and promotes historic inns, taverns, restaurants, museums and sites. Initiative partners created a set of authenticity guidelines for heritage sites, services and events to which all members must adhere. "Our guidelines encourage authentic restorations and interpretation. They help create new products and services and rejuvenate and reinvent existing ones," says Scott Standish, director of long-range and heritage planning for the Lancaster County Planning Commission.

Along with the economic benefits, well-managed programs can protect natural and cultural treasures while improving the quality of life for residents and visitors, says Dorothy Coyle, director of the Chicago Office of Tourism. "We have done some tours on request for art groups in the past," she says. "We determined we could offer them regularly."

In 2005, the tours drew more than 3,200 people, Coyle says. Excursions and interactive experiences highlight the ethnic, artistic and cultural roots of many of the city's neighborhoods. The Chinatown tour, for example, explores the neighborhood where Chicago's first Chinese immigrants settled at the turn of the century. The neighborhood's celebration of National Day, the founding of the Republic of China, draws crowds to view a parade with floats, marching bands, school groups and a 100-foot dragon.

The tours attract Chicago area residents as well as visitors. "The majority of people taking the tours are from the Chicago metro area," Coyle says. "They use them as a familiarization tool and then come back to explore on their own, creating even more tourism."

While state tourism offices manage most cultural heritage tourism programs, some states use less traditional agencies to spearhead programs. The Arizona Humanities Council (AHC), for example, created a workbook to help business owners and communities improve and market small, struggling heritage-based sites. The council

also developed a CD-ROM describing how cultural heritage sites and businesses can work together to develop jointly beneficial initiatives.

In 2002, cultural heritage travelers made up 81 percent of U.S. adults who traveled, according to the NTHP. Also, in 2004 cultural heritage travelers contributed to the \$600 billion generated by the travel and tourism industry, including tax revenues over \$100 billion and \$162 billion in pay for the 7.3 million travel industry workers. The average age of cultural heritage travelers is 49, two years older than the regular traveler, according to the Washington-based Travel Industry Association of America. They also have higher incomes, making around \$48,000 per year versus the average traveler's \$37,000, and they stay longer at their destination while spending more money.

To benefit from cultural tourism, Webb says a town, county or region must have enough of its heritage preserved. "Communities need to promote things that are already there," she says. "As our world becomes more and more homogenous, people will continue to seek out those one-of-a-kind irreplaceable resources that differentiate one destination from the next."

Stephanie Powell is a Denver-based freelance writer.