

# VIRGINIA

TOWN & CITY

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# Bringing tourists to your doorstep



*Come In*  
WE'RE  
**OPEN**

How to attract tourism  
that has staying power

**Inside:**  
2015 General Assembly Wrap-up

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# Responsible T

How to preserve the goose that lay



# Tourism is the golden egg

**W**HERE DID YOU GO on your last vacation? Was it rewarding and satisfying? Or were you disappointed?

Tourism is big business. Americans spend more than \$800 billion a year on travel and recreational pursuits away from home. Travelers spent \$21.5 billion in Virginia in 2013, according to the Virginia Tourism Corporation. Domestic travel expenditures supported 213,000 Virginia jobs, comprising seven percent of total private industry employment. Domestic travel in Virginia directly generated more than \$1.4 billion in tax revenue in 2013.

Tourism is also a doubled edged sword. On the one hand, it provides communities with many benefits: new jobs, an expanded tax base, enhanced infrastructure, improved facilities and an expanded market for local products, art and handicrafts. On the other hand, it can create problems and burdens for local communities, such as crowding, traffic congestion, noise, increased crime, haphazard development, cost-of-living increases and degraded resources. Michael Kelly, former Chairman of the American Planning Association's Tourism Planning Division, says, "The impacts of tourism on a community can be beneficial if planned and managed or extremely damaging if left without controls."

So the question is: how do you maximize the benefits of tourism, while minimizing the burdens? First, communities need to recognize the difference between mass market tourism and responsible tourism. Mass market tourism is all about "heads in beds." It is high volume, high impact, but low yield. A classic example is Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

When I was in college, Ft. Lauderdale was the "spring break capital" of America. City officials thought it was a great idea to invite millions of college kids to come down for a few weeks each year. What they didn't count on, of course, was that the college kids would sleep six to eight per room; the only thing they would spend money on was beer. The city had to hire all kinds of extra police and clean-up crews and pretty soon, Ft. Lauderdale had a reputation as an "out-of-control town full of drunken college kids."

Today, Ft. Lauderdale is no longer the spring break capital. It may not have as many tourists as it used to, but the tourists who do come are older and more affluent. They sleep two people to a room. They dine at fancy restaurants and shop in high-end stores. The city doesn't need to hire extra police and clean-up crews. Responsible tourism is lower volume, lower impact, but higher yield.

**To understand responsible tourism, think about unspoiled scenery, locally-owned businesses, historic small towns and walkable urban neighborhoods.**

Every third weekend in September, State Street in historic Downtown Bristol is amped to the beat of Appalachia's past, present and future at the Bristol Rhythm and Roots Festival. Photo by David Hungate



**Decades ago, Fort Lauderdale was the Spring Break Capital of America. Since then, the city has changed its tourism strategy and today enjoys lower volume, lower impact tourism with higher yield.**

To understand mass market tourism, think about mega hotels, theme parks, chain stores and the new generation of enormous (4,000 to 5,000 passenger) cruise ships. Mass market tourism is about quantity. Mass market tourism is also about environments that are artificial, homogenized, generic and formulaic. In contrast, responsible tourism is about quality. Its focus is places that are authentic, specialized, unique and homegrown. To understand responsible tourism, think about unspoiled scenery, locally-owned businesses, historic small towns and walkable urban neighborhoods.

Like most states, Virginia spends millions of dollars on tourism marketing and promotion. Marketing is important because it helps to create demand. It promotes visitation. It identifies and segments potential visitors and it provides information about a community and its attractions.

Yet, tourism involves a lot more than marketing. It also involves making destinations more appealing. This means identifying, preserving and enhancing a community's natural and cultural assets, in other words, protecting its heritage and environment. After all, it's the unique architecture, culture, wildlife or natural beauty of a community or region that attracts tourists in the first place.

The best marketing a community can have is word of mouth. This occurs when the reality of the place meets or exceeds the mental image that visitors have been sold through marketing and promotion. Creation of a false image can spoil a vacation. What's more, it can reduce repeat visitation. Tourists may come once, but they won't come back.

## Responsible Tourism

The truth is, the more Virginia communities come to look and feel just like everywhere else, the less reason there is to visit. On the other hand, the more a community does to enhance its uniqueness, the more people will want to visit. This is the reason why local land use planning and urban design standards are so important.

To attract and retain tourists, local officials need to become much more aware of the overall character of their community. Studies reveal significant differences between resident and tourist perceptions of a community. Tourists are open and receptive to everything they see, while longtime residents tend to tune out the familiar environments along the roads they travel day in and day out.

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So how can a community attract tourists and their dollars without losing their soul? Here are seven recommendations:

**1 Preserve historic buildings, neighborhoods and landscapes.** A city without a past is like a man without a memory. Preserving historic buildings is important because they are the physical manifestations of our past. They tell us who we are and where we came from. Saving the historic buildings and landscapes of Virginia is about saving the heart and soul of Virginia. It is also about economic competitiveness. Travel writer Arthur From-



**The Civil War Museum in Gordonsville is one of many Civil War attractions within the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area. The Hallowed Ground partnership promotes nine presidential homes, more than 30 historic Main Street communities and numerous other historic and natural attractions. Photo by Kenneth Garreth. Copyright Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership.**



**Yes, it's is Hampton Inn. The owners of the Lexington Hampton Inn converted the 1827 Col Alto Mansion into the centerpiece of a 76-room hotel near historic downtown Lexington. It's a chain hotel that fits in with its historic community.**

mer put it this way: “Among cities with no particular recreational appeal, those that have preserved their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven’t receive almost no tourism at all. Tourism simply won’t go to a city or town that has lost its soul.”

Try to imagine, Alexandria without Old Town, Richmond without the Fan, or Roanoke without its City Market. These communities would be lesser places, but they would also be diminished as tourism destinations.

Preservation-minded communities like Williamsburg, Charlottesville, Fredericksburg, Lexington and Staunton are among Virginia’s leading tourism destinations precisely because they have protected their unique architectural heritage. By contrast, cities that have obliterated their past attract few tourists or their dollars.

**2 Focus on the authentic.** Communities should make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of local heritage and culture, including food, art, music, handicrafts, architecture, landscape and traditions. Responsible tourism emphasizes the real over the artificial. It recognizes that the true story of a place is worth telling, even if it is painful or disturbing.

**3 Ensure that hotels and restaurants are compatible with their surroundings.** Tourists need places to eat and sleep. Wherever they go, they crave integrity of place. Homogenous, “off-the-shelf” corporate chain and franchise architecture works against integrity of place and reduces a community’s appeal as a tourist destination.

Virginia communities need to ask this question: Do you want the character of Virginia and your community to shape new development? Or do you want new development to shape the character of your community? One example of a chain hotel that fits in with a Virginia community is the Hampton Inn in Lexington. Instead of building a generic chain hotel out by the interstate, the owners of the Lexington Hampton Inn converted an 1827 manor house – the Col Alto Mansion – into the centerpiece of a 76-room hotel within walking distance of historic downtown Lexington. The Clarion Inn in Leesburg is another example of a hotel chain fitting in.

In some cases, historic hotels can be the centerpiece of downtown revitalization efforts. The Martha Washington Inn in Abingdon, the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton and

| Mass Market Tourism is ...   | Responsible Tourism is ...  |
|--|---|
| High volume - big crowds   | Lower volume – smaller crowds   |
| High impact – over-taxing police, clean-up crews, infrastructure, damaging local resources | Lower Impact – preserves the natural and material resources, less stress on traffic, police, clean-up crews |
| Low Yield – little money spent locally by tourists   | High Yield – tourists spend money in local shops, restaurants and hotels                                    |
| Offers homogenized, artificial experience  | Offers authentic, unique experiences<br>Accentuates the local character and heritage                        |
| Draws few repeat visitors  | Enjoys devoted audiences of repeat visitors. Best marketing tool is positive word of mouth                  |

Hotel Roanoke in downtown Roanoke are three examples.

Bob Gibbs, one of the nation's leading real estate market analysts says, "When a chain store or hotel developer comes to town they generally have three designs (A, B and C) ranging from Anywhere USA to Unique (sensitive to local character). Which one gets built depends heavily upon how much push back the company gets from local residents and officials about design and its importance."

Design is, of course, critically important in the tourism marketplace. Tourism is the sum total of the travel experience. It is not just what happens at a museum or a festival. It is also about the places that tourists eat and sleep; the roads they drive down, the main streets they shop on and so forth.

Every new development should have a harmonious relationship with its setting. Tourism support facilities should reflect the broader environmental context of the community and should respect the specific size, character and function of their site within the surrounding landscape. Hotels in Virginia, for example, should be different from those in Maine, Missouri, Montana or Morocco.

**4** **Make your story come alive.** Visitors want information about what they are seeing and interpretation can be a powerful storytelling tool that can make an exhibit, an attraction and a community come alive. It can also result in better-managed resources by explaining why they are important. Interpretation instills respect and fosters stewardship. Education about natural and cultural resources can instill community pride and strengthen sense of place.

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Gettysburg, Pa., developed a community-wide interpretation program that involves public art, wayside exhibits and interpretive markers that tell the story of the town and its role in the battle of Gettysburg. They did this, after they realized that most tourists were driving around the national park and then leaving town without realizing that the town itself was a big part of the story. Since the interpretative program was completed, the number of visitors spending time and money in downtown Gettysburg has measurably increased.

The City of Richmond has also done a great job of telling its story. The Richmond Slave Trail, for example, is a walking trail that chronicles the trade of enslaved Africans from Africa to Virginia until 1775 and away from Virginia until 1865. There are numerous historic markers along the route that explain the various sites and cast new light on a dark chapter of U.S. history.

**5** **Protect community gateways: control outdoor signage.** First impressions matter. Some Virginia communities pay attention to their gateways. Other do not. Many communities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as inevitable to progress.



**Dancing on the old wood floors at the Floyd Country Store is one of the many unique local experiences tourists love about the Crooked Road.**

More enlightened communities recognize that community appearance is important. It affects a community's image and its economic well-being. I'll never forget how charmed I was on my first visit to New Market, Va., a Norman Rockwell sort of town in the Shenandoah Valley. Nor will I forget how disappointed I was on a later visit to find giant fast food and gas stations signs towering over the town's historic buildings, obliterating the scenery and diminishing the town's appeal as a tourist destination.

Downtown is the heart of most Virginia communities, but the commercial corridors leading to downtown are the front door. Arlington County is incentivizing redevelopment along Columbia Pike, replacing unsightly auto-oriented development with walkable, mixed use development.

Protecting scenic views and vistas, planting street trees, landscaping parking lots all make economic sense, but controlling outdoor signs is probably the most important step a community can take to make an immediate visible improvement in its physical environment. Almost nothing will destroy the distinctive character of a community faster than uncontrolled signs and billboards. Sign clutter is ugly, ineffective and expensive. Almost all of America's premier tourist destinations have strong sign ordinances because they understand that attractive communities attract more business than ugly ones.

**6** **Enhance the journey as well as the destination.** Tourism is the sum total of the travel experience. Getting there can be half the fun, but frequently, it is not.

There are many great destinations in Virginia; however, except for a few special roads, like the Blue Ridge Parkway, there are very few noteworthy journeys left. This is why it is in the interest of state and local officials to encourage development of heritage corridors, bike paths, rail trails, greenways and scenic byways.

**7 Get Them Out of the Car.** If you design a community around cars, you'll get more cars, but if you design a community around people, you'll get more pedestrians. It is hard to spend money when you are in a car, so getting people out of cars is a key to responsible tourism and increased business. The Virginia Creeper Trail in Southwest Virginia is considered one of the best rail trails for cyclists in the country. It runs 35 miles from Abingdon to Whitetop (Va.) near the North Carolina state line. It has brought thousands of tourists and new life to an economically distressed part of the state.

**8 Create a "trail" with neighboring communities.** The Journey through Hallowed Ground Heritage Area promotes nine presidential homes, numerous Civil War sites, more than 30 historic Main Street communities and numerous other historic and natural attractions. Few rural communities can successfully attract out-of-state or international visitors on their own, but linked with other communities, they can become a coherent and powerful attraction.

**9 Ask yourself, "How many tourists are too many?"** Tourism development that exceeds the carrying capacity of an ecosystem or that fails to respect a community's sense of place will result in resentment by local residents and the eventual destruction of the very attributes that attracted tourists in the first place. Too many cars, tour buses, condominiums or people can overwhelm a community and harm fragile resources.

Responsible tourism requires planning and management. Annapolis, Maryland, Charleston, South Carolina and Williamsburg, Virginia are examples of communities with tourism management plans. In Charleston, for example, the city

prohibits large tour buses in the neighborhood south of Broad Street, known as the Battery. It also directs travelers to the city's visitor center, which is located well away from historic residential neighborhoods that were being overrun by tourists. It has also built new attractions, like the South Carolina Aquarium, in underserved areas of the city, instead of concentrating everything in one or two overcrowded neighborhoods.

## Preserving Virginia's unique natural assets

In recent years, Virginia tourism has had steadily less to do with Virginia and more to do with mass marketing. As farms, forests and open lands decrease, advertising dollars increase. As historic buildings disappear, chain stores proliferate. As main streets come back to life, congested commercial corridors spread on the outskirts of our towns. Unless the tourism industry thinks it can continue to sell trips to communities clogged with traffic, look-alike motels, overcrowded beaches and cluttered commercial strips, it needs to create a plan to preserve the natural, cultural and scenic resources upon which it relies.

Tourism is about more than marketing. It is also about protecting and enhancing the product we are trying to promote. Citizens, elected officials and developers alike can take a leadership role in creating a responsible tourism agenda that will strengthen the Virginia economy, while at the same time preserving the natural and cultural assets that make it unique. 

### About the author

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The Virginia Creeper Trail stretches 34 miles from Abingdon to Damascus, Va., along the Whitetop Laurel River. The Virginia Creeper Trail is open year round to hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding.